*Sermon Text for December 15, 2013*

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Matthew 11:2-6, Isaiah 35:1-7

“A word out of place”

Well, we survived the storm and we’ve made it all safe and sound. You received two emails from me this past week. I sent out an email to the parents of the youth and entitled it one foot back and one foote forward. We can really get a lot of wordplay on these two and go a long way with it. Words, they are amazing creatures aren’t they? They can encourage you, tear you down, make clear, and confuse.

I’m coaching the girls middle school basketball team at LMH and we had our first game on Friday. It was during an intense time of the game when we were still in it and I called a time out because I wanted to implement something different. I went over a full court press and dropping back into a 2-3 and I had my board with the court and the x’s and o’s and got into it and I thought, okay, this is going to work. We huddled to go back out when one of the girls said: coach, is that on offense or defense. I knew the words that I thought were so clear had been completely lost.

We have been trying to see the words of the prophet Isaiah together, and you should be sensing a theme. A sword to a plowshare, a shoot from a stump, water from a desert filling the sanctuary. They are all words out of place that allow us to see hope and promise in that which is traditionally considered hopeless and without value or redemption. Let’s read and see if we can identify these words that are out of place and see them to change our lives.

Every single scholar that I have read that has written on these Isaiah Scriptures have said the same thing: These words are out of place, they don’t belong here in chapter 35. You see we find ourselves in the midst of Isaiah, especially chapter 34 with a reality that is one of captivity and slavery where all we hear is that Israel is being judged and condemned for its unfaithfulness. The message of Isaiah up to this point is that God has turned His back on you because you have been unfaithful. That same message is picked up in 36 and beyond so 35 just seems, well, out of place. A word inserted where it doesn’t belong.

So who moved this word? But some things even our best scholarship can’t explain. The Spirit hovered over the text and over Isaiah: Put it here, breathed the Spirit, before anyone is ready. Interrupt the narrative of despair. So, here it is, a word that couldn’t wait until it made more sense. It is a great example of the fact that the kingdom is not of our doing or our control, but it is instituted and maintained by God.

A pastor friend of mine told me about this family in his church who had a girl named Gladys who had down syndrome. Every year for the Christmas pageant she would come and watch it with her parents, they not wanting to impose on the organizers with their unspoken wish of some place for their daughter. This most recent year it was one where they knew they didn’t have a chance because a new director had taken over and she was strict and demanding, even of the kids. They got to church early that year and Gladys saw in the hallway the feathery wings of the angels hanging ready to be put on and she walked up and stroked them, dreaming.

The director rounded the corner and saw her and walked up to her and said: “What are you doing?” Gladys didn’t even look at her but focused on the wings said: “I like angels wings”. “Well, if you like them so much go inside, put on a pair and follow the other angels out. You’re going to be an angel this year.” It happened so fast the parents couldn’t react and Gladys was gone and when she came out in front of the church she was the most radiant angel on stage.

A word out of place in Isaiah gives us hope that there can be times in our lives when words out of place can take us to a new reality that God wants for us and not what the world would expect from us. Let’s go to the Gospel of John and look at the Baptist’s question to the disciples of Jesus. Are you the one or shall we wait for another. Out of prison, a place of despair comes his question, an attempt to catch some glimpse of what could be. You aren’t like the rest of them, you do things differently, you seem out of place from anyone else.

Jesus’ answer is classic, he doesn’t say yes or no, he tells John to see the words: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleaned, the deaf hear, the dead resurrected, the poor hear good news. You tell me, is that enough? Things happening that shouldn’t happen to get your attention and let you know that God remains in control.

For some reason we have an aversion to words of hope and celebration in times of despair. We want to compound the despair and focus on the loss instead of lifting up the hope and focusing on the victory. I remember in seminary a classmate had an aversion to hymns at funerals because who in the midst of grief is able to sing at the lowest time in their life. My professor responded, that’s why you sing hymns, so the church can sing for them. That’s why you have a jazz parade for a funeral procession, that’s why you sing Gospel in the midst of slavery.

Is it not true that God wants us to be the most hopeful when all hope is gone? Isaiah here dares to speak a Word out of place. A word that refuses to wait until things improve. His words conflict with all of the data that has been gathered. We are a data driven people. We see and hear it every night on the news and every morning on the front page of the paper. We are waist high in the real word and for some of us that is all we know.

To add to that we have the data of our lives, waiting for a test result from the doctor, mourning the death of a loved one, wondering if we’ll make it through the next round of layoffs. We know the data and at times we long to hear that word out of place.

Advent is a time when we are told to rely on the Word out of place. I tell you to wait patiently for the coming of Christ. Anticipate and expect Jesus to come, but wait for it. That’s the opposite of what the world tells us. I fully recognize the Gospel Word is out of place, but I embrace it.

Isaiah’s word out of place depicts the arid and dry and barron and lifeless spring to life which is seen by water, abundant flowing water that fills the sanctuary and transforms the burning sand to a pool. He speaks to those waiting for life waiting for life to be transformed and gives them the hope of a promise.

There is no one greater and better at speaking a Word out of place than the Word made flesh. He tells John don’t worry about what you hear, but focus on what is being seen. Don’t just see the vision of the future, but go and tell other people about it. Who here is willing to speak a Word out of place, to defeat despair with the hope found in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I need to confess that I am beginning to see a vision for this church and a ministry that I never imagined existed. It is coming very much as a Word out of place for me. I like to worship God in my space, and in my way. And if people interrupt that, or something unpredictable happens then it throws me off and my worship, I have always felt, gets interrupted and suffers.

For some reason God is bringing to this church people who have vested interests with people with disabilities. Four families with children who attend and are involved in the life of the church, Laura who left her position to follow a dream, a calling to work full time pursuing her life goal that God has placed on her heart. Even David Russel, ask him about his work these days. I have no desire for this ministry. I have no experience, I have very strong misgivings because it could really interrupt and mess up how we do things around here, you know, decently and in order.

I mean, think about it. Can you imagine or see more people with disabilities worshipping here, speaking out inappropriately, causing confusion. I mean, it would be worse than if we had a dozen babies and their families in church every Sunday. I mean, who would even want something like that. Talk about noisy and chaotic. A church without disruption is a dead church. A church that doesn’t crave a word out of place is a church that has become too comfortable with the word of the world.

A word out of place doesn’t always fit nice and neat. It certainly didn’t for Isaiah but the end result was an installment of hope for the people that lasted forever and is drawn from even today. Jesus’ presence in our lives demands that we see these Words out of place calling us to a working ministry where maybe, just maybe, we step away from what we are used to and step into a place that is unknown.

May God bless us and surround us with his love as we look for those Words out of place that can change our lives and our church forever.