

Christmas Day
December 25, 2011
The Rev. George Heberling

Isaiah 52: 7-10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1: 1-12
John 1: 1-14

Michael lay in the hospital bed. It had now been several weeks since the accident, but still every bone and muscle seemed to ache. The doctors told him he was lucky that he was still alive, but sometimes in the midst of all the pain, Michael wondered how lucky he really was.

It had happened all of a sudden. He was just driving along in his pickup truck when out of nowhere another vehicle hit the passenger side door. The force of the impact threw him out the driver's side and he landed amid a pile of rocks put alongside the road to prevent erosion when it rained. It seemed like forever until help arrived. Michael's body was twisted and broken. He lost a lot of blood. At first they didn't know if he was going to survive at all.

But he did survive. His body had a lot of healing to do, and it would require a good deal of physical therapy, but now, after several weeks, the doctors were optimistic that Michael could eventually return to a normal pattern of life. It would require a lot of hard work and patience. He would probably always walk with a limp, and the scars would be a constant reminder.

Michael lay on the bed as he had for several weeks. If you have ever been in a hospital bed for any length of time, you know that words can't express the kind of bleakness that can come over you when you are lie there – half dead, drugged, miserable, aching, disoriented, and feeling very alone. Michael had many of those times. And it just so happened that a friend came visiting during one of those moments. John didn't really know what to say. He just stopped by because he wasn't really doing anything. It was difficult for Michael to communicate in the midst of the aching; there was really nothing John knew to say or do. It was one of those uncomfortable situations. Michael laying on the hospital bed – miserable, alone, hurting; John standing there feeling very awkward. And so John did what any of us would do; he started to excuse himself, to say goodbye, so that Michael could rest. But Michael stopped him. He stopped him and said, "You know, I'm due for my next shot of pain killer in fifteen minutes and fifteen minutes after that, I won't feel a thing. I will fall

asleep. But right now, I really hurt badly. Can you stay?” “Can you stay?”, Michael asked. And of course, John stayed. And John kept on doing what he had been doing. There was nothing to say. There was nothing to do. But at least Michael did not have to be alone. John was there for him. Somehow, in the darkest and most painful of times, the emptiness and the despair don’t feel quite so empty and desperate when we’re not alone.

Now, fortunately, most of us have never been in Michael’s position. Most of us haven’t suffered in a major accident. We haven’t had the exact same kind of traumatic experience. But I dare say this morning that, although we haven’t experienced that exact situation, most of us have experienced the darkness and the pain, the emptiness and the despair -- that reality has not been a stranger. We’ve been there; maybe we’re there at this very moment. We know people there. Am I loveable? Am I forgivable? Does my life have any real purpose or meaning? Do I have to go through this alone? Why does it hurt so much? What did I do to deserve this? These are the questions that the gnawing inside brings us.

This is what Jesus came to fill. Just like John visiting his friend Michael in the hospital, Jesus came to sit with us. He can’t wave a magic wand and fix everything; to do that would take away our freedom and an important part of what makes us human. But he can sit with us. He can assure us that we are in fact not only loveable but loved. He can assure us that we are not only forgivable, but forgiven. He can give our lives real purpose and meaning. He can reassure us that we are not alone. He can affirm to us the presence of a loving God who gave us the gift of a child who became a man for us and experienced our human despair and anguish. Not because we are perfect. Not because we have earned it. But because that is, plainly and simply, just God’s way of love.

This is what we celebrate in this day. For in spite of everything, in the midst of the unknown journey and the painful realities, we have hope to fill the emptiness. A hope that will not disappoint us. God loves us, just the way we are; God secures our hope by reaching down to us. A message of love and hope that comes, not only to saints, but to shepherds and sinners, to those who experience the emptiness, to those who are scared, to those who look ahead and see only darkness. “To you this day in the city of David, is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” He came to give us light in the midst of our darkness, confidence in the midst of our fears, hope in the midst of our pain, peace in the midst of our confusion, joy in the midst of our sorrow. The One who lived among us as a child and grew to manhood, promised us life in all its fullness. The One who still lives among us as our Savior stands beside us and when we ask, “Will you stay?”, He answers, “Of course, I am with you always.” Amen.