"Punching Holes in the New Year"
Psalm 148
January 2, 2011

Today is January 2nd – the first Sunday of 2011. That said, it is still Christmas by the way, and it will be Christmas until January 6th. We are only up to the nine ladies dancing – we still have to get through the Lords a Leaping, the Pipers Piping and the Drummers Drumming. In the church year, we have an entire little season to ponder these mysterious things in our heart – we need that. Surely, we are not so pompous as to believe that we can GET the incarnation all in one day. I mean, don't you think we need more than 24 hours to consider what it means to have God with us? Don't you think we need more than 24 hours to experience pure joy to the world? Don't you think we need more than 24 hours to bask in all the promises that God swaddled up for us with that little baby? I do, and I'll tell you what else I think we need more than 24 hours for. Recovery! Am I right?

Early in December, my mother was preparing to accompany Handel's Messiah which she has done every December for the last – I don't even know – how many years. But, it is a big deal. The Statesville community does a huge production of the Messiah. They hire soloists with these booming voices, and the choir is a walk-in choir, which means if you know the music, you can walk in and sing. A lot of people know the music! So, I called my mom a few weeks ago and she was practicing for the performance, and she said, "You know, I love this time of year, but I'm always glad when the Messiah has come and gone." I know what she means. After the Messiah, she gets some relief! Her life just got better.

As for me, 'better' is not my first word choice for the week after Christmas– *tired* maybe and even *sad* because it does feel like the baby, Messiah Jr., HAS come and gone for another year. If we haven't already, we soon will box up all the decorations that we so carefully set out. The fudge disappears. The cookie tins no longer refill themselves. The scented candles get stashed in the closet. Sweet cards stop arriving in the mail. And, all of THAT can make me quite Eeyorish if I am not careful. But, this year, I've thought about my mom's statement that "I'm always GLAD when the Messiah has come and gone" and I think she's on to something.

When we celebrate Christmas, we ARE celebrating that the world has just gotten some long awaited RELIEF! The darkness has been pierced with the loving light of God. Whatever pit we found ourselves in during the old year is no longer so deep that God cannot get through. Whatever our obligations and our tasks over the holidays, they worked! Jesus came. God got here! Life just got better. But, we really don't have to rush past the wonder of it all to get back to our regularly scheduled program. That's where the characters of today really differ from the Nativity characters. After the Christmas rush, - after the angels, after the stable, after the Child, those Nativity characters also went back to a world that does not give a hoot about angels and stars and especially not the Child. The difference is that we go back complaining that it doesn't last. They went back singing praises to God – glad that the Messiah had come and that the day had gone because new life was now here! We all have to go back, but we can still sing the alleluias. You see, the response to Christmas Day coming and going is gladness and praise.

*Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him all his angels, praise him sun and moon and all you shining stars, praise him mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, creeping things and flying birds, praise the Lord! S*ome say that we are not a "praise the Lord" kind of

congregation. I don't know that I agree with that as praise comes in many different forms, but I will confess that sometimes, I'm not sure I know how to praise the Lord. So, I just don't do it. How does that happen? If hills and fruit trees can praise the Lord, how is it that we ever get too inhibited to sing our hearts out to God? If creeping things and flying birds can praise the Lord, what makes us suppress our soul's need to say to God, "your glory is above earth and heaven?" When do we stop noticing the little moments when nature does worship – you know, the breeze, the sunshine, the changing seasons? Why is praising God optional?

Well, we are awfully familiar with God and his expedition into the human world. For 2000 years, the Christmas story has been alive and well. However, it started as a revolution – an unsettling story that turned the world and its good religious folk upside down with its words about the powerful being knocked from their thrones and the lowly being lifted up. But, it's a familiar, expected story now – not unsettling at all. Right or wrong, it's the unsettled stuff that gets our prayerful attention. That means that when it comes to God, we are more likely to bring the unsettling things before him than to bring our praise. That's different from the Psalmist. Yes, the Psalmist complained, but the Psalmist also offered praise as easily as he breathed. Praise just filled his imagination! *Sea monsters, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy winds, kings of the earth, you men and women alike, old and young together!*

Can you imagine that - that all the earth could break out into praise to God? Is that what you read about in the paper each morning – all the earth praising God? Is that what you hear when you walk out your front door– all the earth praising the Lord?? Actually, you probably could. You can find all kinds of praise if you watch a bird in flight or catch a glimpse of a fish swimming in the water - the earth naturally praises God. The sea monsters get it! The challenge is for earth's people. We have to remember to praise even after the fa-la-la's are silenced.

Our culture makes that very difficult. We are inundated with self-help. We want to help ourselves to be better parents; better teachers; better managers - to have better bodies; to be smarter or richer. And to a certain degree we bring that into our faith and sometimes into church. How can I be a better Christian? How can I be more spiritual? How can I find answers for my problems? And ministers want to help you with those things. We want to bring you good tidings of great joy and have you leave with hope. But it does seem to me that there is something inherently self-centered with that agenda in worship. If all we do in this place is centered around our personal development and fulfillment, then it seems we have missed a huge part of what church is supposed to be about: praising God – worship - not helping ourselves!

If you think that's not important, look around you! Look at the people who get stuck inside themselves with hurt or grief and who have no idea that Almighty God was just born again into their lives. Look at the people who turn to things like overeating or shopping or making fun of others or isolating themselves– because they want to feel some relief, and they turn to their own power which makes it worse. Relief comes when we get outside of ourselves and turn to God. We were created to praise the Lord – when we don't, we feel it right here. It's empty, restless, irritable, hollow and dark.

This is where I crave the strength of the Psalms. The Psalms know that God is worthy of praise. The Psalms invite us to 'come and see what God has done.' It's a wonderful invitation for this time of year. Come and see what God has done. Come and see this thing which has come to pass. And, when you find the living breathing presence of God, and you will, praise him. Praise God for the trust in your child's eye. Praise God for the warm bed you'll crawl into tonight. Praise God for the stars and the heavens and the deeps of the oceans and the snow and

the frost and the sun that melts it away. Praise God that a baby came and redeemed all of creation – including us – praise God that a baby came with a heart that could light up the world.

That's where we are now…lighting up the world. Christmas did not end, praise God. After the majesty of the Messiah has come and gone. After the gifts have been unwrapped. After the turkey is in the Tupperware – there is still this light. A 19th century writer by the name of Robert Louis Stevenson shares a wonderful memory. From birth, he had poor health. He could not run and play like normal children, he did not have friends like normal children, and he spent a lot of time in his room looking out the window. One night, he stood by that window for the longest time, and his nurse asked him, "*Robert, what are you doing*?" He said, "*I'm watching that old man knock holes in the darkness"*. She said, "*what are you talking about?" He* said, *"Well, there's a man who comes each night and climbs up the ladder and lights the light, comes down, moves the ladder to the next pole, climb ups, comes down, moves the ladder."* And everywhere…when he would light a light it appeared to the boy that a hole was being knocked in the darkness. No matter how lonely he might have been during the day or how sick he felt, there was a moment of wonder each day when a man came by to poke holes in the ink black sky.

We're at the window in January. We watched Christmas knock a hole in the darkness. The Messiah CAME to the earth and knocked a hole in the darkness. The Messiah ROSE from the earth and knocked a hole in the darkness. Now, it's our turn. It's our turn to carry God's alleluia into our homes, and then out our doors and into the world. Praise keeps our souls breathing in the fresh spirit of God, and I'll you, the world is ready to go dark again – the world is ready to entice us again with its sales. The world is ready stop the music. The world is ready to rush us on the next Hallmark holiday, and why not? It's not up to the world or the government or anybody ELSE to keep the light on. That's our job. It's up to us to return as did the shepherds praising God for all that we have seen and heard. It's up to us to keep poking holes in the darkness as the calendar rolls on.

Really, that's not a bad mission for a group of post-Christmas Christians - poke holes in the darkness. That's it. That's what Jesus did. Jesus did not take away the darkness of world hunger, he poked a hole in it. We can to by taking a meal to a lonely person. Jesus did not take away the darkness of war and violence, but he poked a hole in it. We can to by letting go of a grudge and moving on. Jesus did not fix the darkness of grief or depression for every person, but he poked a hole in it. We can to by a kind word, a call just to see how you're doing. We may not be a *praise the Lord* congregation with our volume, but we sure can be with our acts. We can follow Jesus. There are many people looking out their windows thinking it's all over. What they don't know is that you've got the light. You can show them a better way. You can be the hole puncher extraordinaire in 2011. So, consider your life, your family, your school, your work…where can you shine? Where can WE shine? Why don't we in this brand new year see if we can set our own Lord a leaping with a life of hole punching and praise?