

Joy for Those Who Are Watching

Third Sunday of Advent

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Texts: Isaiah 35.1-10;
 Luke 1.46b-55;
 James 5.7-10;
 Matthew 11.2-11

This is one of those Sundays when our scripture could just as well be sung as read. Can't you hear the poetry of Isaiah through Handel's Messiah or the Magnificat from Mary in a number of different musical settings? The choir will share one of those in the offertory today. The tone on this third Sunday of Advent begins to shift. You can feel it in the music, the themes of scripture, the prayers of the day. Advent begins in the plaintive tones of longing. We sit in the metaphorical darkness and light just one candle longing for hope, longing for peace. As the light continues to gather, today we begin to speak - to sing - of Joy.

I appreciated Gordon's sermon last week. It is good to have him back in the pulpit again isn't? I appreciated in particular his invitation this Advent to set aside all of our preconceived ideas about why Jesus came to live among us and what God is seeking to do in and through us as a result. I took that invitation seriously when approaching the scriptures for this week especially because they are so familiar and such iconic passages.

Let's look first at this passage from Isaiah. Talk about a turning point in terms of tone! Chapter 35 is festive, celebratory. We read a description of the earth itself coming back to life; a desert that bursts into bloom. We read of the weak and feeble finding strength. We hear of fearful hearts being made strong. It's a turning point in the prophecy of Isaiah. Chapter 34, the one just before it is entitled *The Judgment of the Nations*. The poetry of that passage is anything but festive and celebratory. It's much like the contrast we saw two weeks ago between Isaiah chapter 1 and chapter 2. The prophecies of judgment are dark and harsh.

As the poetry of chapter 34 unfolds and you come to verse 11 you begin to see the logic of this judgment and why Isaiah spends so much time in that place. This is what it says in chapter 34, verse 11: “The Lord shall stretch the line of confusion over (the land), and the plummet of chaos over its nobles.” Scholars point to the words translated as *confusion* and *chaos* as echoes of the creation story¹. That what is happening in this vision of judgment is a return to that primordial chaos before creation. It was a way for the prophet to describe how the world around them had become so corrupt, so utterly broken, so full of chaos that what was needed was a completely new creation. In order for that new creation to spring forth the old, familiar, corrupt ways of life had to come to an end. Much of the early work of the prophet is to get the attention of God’s people who are blind to what God is showing them, deaf to what God is saying to them.

I was pointed in my reading this week back to chapter 6 where the prophet is initially told what to say to God’s people²: “ ‘Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.’ Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.”³ It’s a harsh Word from the prophet meant to disorient and disrupt those who hear it. It is meant to jar people from their ordinary, habitual ways of life. That has been the ongoing tone of Isaiah up until this point – with little flashes of hope along the way like the chapter 2 and chapter 11 – but mostly this jarring, disorienting Word of judgment.

And now here in chapter 35, the prophet makes a turn. If you think of the music that could best bring the poetry of the text to life, the shift is from plaintive and foreboding toward a lighter registration, a more hopeful tone that continues to build in energy and vitality until you come into verse 5 and the piece just bursts open as God’s grace is proclaimed: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, then the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy!”

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 272.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 277.

³ Isaiah 6.9-10.

Jesus picks up this prophecy from Isaiah when friends of John the Baptist ask Jesus if he is the One who is to come or whether they should wait for another. Jesus invites them to go and tell John what they hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear. When you hear this litany of Jesus' ministry in light of Isaiah, you recognize that more is being said here than simply lifting up the miraculous healing stories of the gospels. What God is doing among us in Jesus is restoring our humanity. His mission is one of total re-creation. Taking what is broken and making it whole. Inviting those who are corrupt to hand over their power and inviting those who are oppressed to step into their own. To begin to completely rework the ways we see and hear and experience this life that God has given us.

As you begin to see and hear what Jesus is doing you begin to recognize that what Jesus is restoring to us is the joy of our humanity...the joy of God's creation. Jesus' concern as he moves throughout the gospels is not who has sinned and is therefore separated from God (as Gordon pointed out last week). His concern is with who is hurting and needs compassion. Who is sick and needs healing. Who is excluded and oppressed and needs connection and justice.

I want you to think with me about a time when you were really, really sick and then the relief and the joy in waking up one day feeling better. Think about a time when you were painfully lonely and then the joy that comes when someone finally sees you and comes along side of you to offer companionship. Think about a time when you saw injustice whether it was against you or someone else. Then think about the sheer joy that comes when you hear that justice has finally prevailed.

We've been hearing stories out of South Africa this past week as people memorialized Nelson Mandela. It brought to mind a strong memory that I hold from my time at Princeton Seminary. I remember watching three members of our community go together to the United Nations to vote in advance of the first multi-racial election in South Africa that was held on April 27, 1994. One was a white Afrikaner who had been voting his whole life, one was a so called "colored" man and the third was a friend of mine,

a “black” man, Bohvi Musangwa, who was voting for the very first time. He was triumphant as he went to vote, tears in his eyes. I can still remember him dancing around - literally dancing around - at the sheer joy of seeing justice after having worked so hard and suffered so much.

That is the joy that filled Mary’s heart when she learned who this child within her was going to be. And it is the kind of joy that is our birthright....it is what Jesus came to restore to us. He shows us where to look and tells us what to watch for. Any time human suffering is relieved, any time justice prevails, anytime we experience grace that is undeserved and unexpected we touch the joy of our salvation.

I saw a video clip this week that in many ways captured the joy of this season. I’m somewhat hesitant to admit this because in some ways the video reflects all that is wrong with the way that Americans celebrate Christmas. It was an example of extravagant gift giving and I do not mean to suggest that our possessions are what bring us joy. With that word of caution, let me tell what I saw.

An airline set up a gift in the middle of the departure gate for one of its flights. It had a screen in the middle of it. People were invited to scan their boarding pass and then were greeted by Santa Claus over a screen asking them what they wanted for Christmas. As people shared their wish list, employees were scribbling furious notes. As the people boarded the plane, employees at their destination ran frantically all over town shopping for these gifts. As people stood around the baggage claim, the first packages to come over the carousel were presents for each and every passenger. It was so delightful watching people figure out what was going on; seeing the joy in their faces as they opened these presents that were completely unexpected and undeserved. It wasn’t the gifts themselves. It was what came over these people when they realized that someone had gone to such great lengths to bring them a little a joy. It was their reaction to the grace of the moment - the unexpected generosity that moved people to tears. That’s what was captivating as I watched it.

Sometimes those moments of joy come when you recognize, as Mary did, that history is changing tides before your very eyes. And sometimes it is a

simple moment, barely noticeable to the rest of the world where you see a small wrong being made right, a simple gesture of kindness that soothes an aching heart, a flash of beauty that captures you're eye because you knew *where* to look and *what* to look for.

Joy for those who are watching...that is what Jesus came to bring us. In the words of Frederick Buechner: "Joy is home." Buechner goes further to say: "God created us in joy and created us for joy...(God's) mark is deep within us. We have God's joy in our blood."⁴

So even if it takes time and calls on every last ounce of our patience; even if we must risk as Jesus did to share this joy with the world, we must be a people who exude joy....joy is our home, it is in our blood...it who we are.

On this third Sunday of Advent: Let us rejoice!

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, 280 quoting Frederick Buechner from his book *The Longing for Home*, 128.