

Sunday, December 14th 2014

Readings

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, **2** to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, **3** and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor. **4** They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. **5** Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. **6** And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast. **7** Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs. **8** "For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. **9** Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed." **10** I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. **11** For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Psalm 126

1 When the LORD brought back the captives to Zion, we were like men who dreamed. **2** Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." **3** The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. **4** Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev. **5** Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. **6** He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

16 Be joyful always; **17** pray continually; **18** give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. **19** Do not put out the Spirit's fire; **20** do not treat prophecies with contempt. **21** Test everything. Hold on to the good. **22** Avoid every kind of evil. **23** May God himself, the God of

peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. **24** The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. **25** Brothers, pray for us. **26** Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

6 There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. **7** He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. **8** He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. **9** The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. **10** He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. **11** He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. **12** Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- **13** children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. **14** The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. **15** John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' " **16** From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. **17** For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. **18** No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. **19** Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. **20** He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ. " **21** They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." **22** Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself ?" **23** John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.' " **24** Now some Pharisees who had been sent **25** questioned him, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" **26** "I baptize with water," John replied, "but among you stands one you do not know. **27** He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."**28** This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Sermon

Grace to you and peace from God our Father,
God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit:
Amen.

I love words. Love them. Some people say this makes me a nerd. Those people are correct. But I don't just love big words. That idea flabbergasts me. I love words because sometimes a single term can connect with almost inexpressible concepts. The way that the word is formed in the mouth and hits the ear, the way that the sounds connect with the meaning, the ways that words carry a sort of innate power.

And one of those words is "joy." Joy. Try to say joy without a twinge of a smile, without a hint of a grin. You can do it – *JOY* – but it takes an unnatural

amount of effort to frame the word that way. Joy itself is an infectious disposition. And today, this third Sunday in Advent, is Joy Sunday.

We've come through the first two weeks of prophecy and preparation to this place of joy. On the older styled Advent wreaths, the pink candle that demarcated a significant change in our Advent journey was that sign of joy. From the purple of royalty and penitence to the pink of celebration and hopefulness. Here in our space, we started with a few wreaths, then added some greenery, but now we're to the place of chrismons and candles, of nativities in the windows and candles gracing the sills. The signs of our joy are rising as we step closer and closer to Bethlehem's baby.

Yet, at times we simply cannot muster the joy called for by this season, called for by this baby, called for by the good news of our salvation. Some of us mourn the loss of loved ones as we spend our first Christmas without them, and others carry the memories of loved ones who died during the holidays long ago. Some of us struggle to make ends meet, not just for presents and travel, but for food and the electric bill. Some of us struggle with our own illnesses, our own dissatisfaction with the speed of construction projects, or our incredibly hectic lives that seem to sap the joy right out of the season of Advent. Our anticipation of Christmas seems so bogged down with reality that joy, often, remains a feeling far off.

Joy is often difficult to conjure, even as we hear and know good news.

This only becomes more evident in the headlines over the past few days. More and more people are rising to protest the deaths of young black men like Eric Garner, people both black and white, both Republican and Democrat. And then we see reports that detail the torturous methods our country used to extract information from enemies, something which calls into question our nation's integrity and deepened the political divide within the country. And yet, somehow, someway, today is Joy Sunday.

Scripture is pregnant with joy today, but notice that Isaiah's proclamation of good news comes not to those who are already joyful. Rather, this message

of hopefulness comes to the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the blind, the mourning, the grieved, the despairing, the devastated, the shamed, the disgraced. Today is about the introduction of joy into the sorrows of the world. In poignant poetry, the psalm proclaims, that "those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy."

Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. That is the Advent joy, the kind that promises deliverance within our bondage, that promises light within our darkness, that provides hope in the midst of fear. Advent joy is a promise to the world that the *status quo* will be overthrown, and a promise that begins with a child in swaddling clothes.

The joy of advent is not for the rich or the

powerful or the establishment. It is not for those unacquainted with sorrow. This joy, today's joy, is for those who've been bound by sorrow for too long, for those mouths have forgotten how to smile when they say the word, whose hearts have lost the capacity for hopefulness when dashed with hopelessness at every turn.

Why? Because those who have found solace in money don't want the liberation of an infant savior. Those who have found stability in worldly power don't want the release granted by the power of selflessness in a death on a cross. Those who have found peace in the violence and oppression of the establishment fear the kind of joy that promises to turn the world upside down, to empower the powerless, to raise up

the poor. Those who don't want the world to change have absolutely no use for the joy of Advent.

You see, much like the band Boston once sang, joy is about much more than a feeling. We typically think of joy as an emotion, a welling up of giddy sensations, where joy becomes this passing passion. But the joy that we find in the Psalm and Isaiah, the Pauline "rejoice always" kind of joy is definitely about more than a feeling.

This joy is more about a disposition, about creating a habit of transformative action, where joy becomes operative in our lives. . A group of theologians from the 4th century, known as the Cappadocian Fathers, talked about this in terms of habituation. They suggested that Christians ought to

become habituated, ought to create habits that reflect the image of God.

The kind of joy we find in Advent is about a habit, a practice of joyfulness. Rather than simply feeling joy, this is about a commitment to consider the Gospel in the midst of the present tragedies, about acknowledging the good news, about living out the Gospel, even as we see bad news in our daily lives. Now, this isn't about sugarcoating calamity, or as one of my mentors used to say, it's not frosting a mud pie. Rather, at this point in the season of Advent, this is a reminder that we have reason to rejoice even as we have reason to mourn. We have reason to express our joy even as we have reason to sound our laments.

You might notice that I've donned a different robe than normal. This black robe, called a cassock, is traditionally reserved for non-communion liturgies. However, this week we received a letter from a group of religious authorities across the nation, led by the leaders of traditionally African American denominations, and accompanied by our own Bishop Eaton and Bishop Mauney. We've been asked to wear black as a simple affirmation, that black lives matter, as a way of signifying joy amidst the present sorrows of our black sisters and brothers.

In the midst of our Advent joy, there is a great lament rising within the black community about the loss of life, especially of young black men. Many people wonder whether this is the place of the

church, to make commentaries about so-called social issues.

Yet, listen again to the words of Isaiah about the role of Gospel Proclamation: “the LORD has anointed me to preach **good news to the poor**. He has sent me to **bind up the brokenhearted**, to **proclaim freedom for the captives** and **release from darkness for the prisoners**, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, **to comfort all who mourn**, and **provide for those who grieve in Zion**-- to bestow on them a **crown of beauty instead of ashes**, the **oil of gladness instead of mourning**, and a **garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair**.” I don't know that you can get more socially concerned than this. In the eyes of Isaiah, we

must come alongside those who are brokenhearted, those who grieve and mourn, not just for the sake of future salvation but for the work of present transformation. In fact, this is the very witness of the incarnation: God coming alongside us who are brokenhearted, us who grieve and mourn, not just to secure a future in heaven but to change the earth for the better right now. So I wear this cassock as an affirmation of the integrity of black life, as a sign of Gospel joy, in the midst of the sorrows we now face as a church and as a society.

Advent is not meant to be an innocuous, spiritualized season. It is about the embodiment of God actively changing the world for those ostracized by the present formation of the world. To bind up the

brokenhearted, we must acknowledge those whose hearts are broken. To comfort those who mourn, we must seek to comprehend their sadness. Only then, when our joy takes on flesh amongst those in need of deliverance does it become the kind of joy proclaimed by Isaiah, the kind of joy sought by Jesus.

This is good news that not only affirms the integrity of all humanity, but works to restore the integrity of those lives devalued by society. That is the kind of joy that advent demands. Joy that brings new life. Joy that restores the image of God within us. Joy that helps to heal our communities. Joy that promises an end to the present sufferings. That is the kind of habit of joy we are called to have this advent –

habits that change the world for the good. And that is a reason to rejoice. Amen.