

ADVENT 3, 11-12-22 *The Reverend Lorna Green*

Isaiah 35:1-10; Song of Mary; James 5:7-10; *Matthew 11:2-11.*

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

*"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."*

Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is about joy. Joy with a capital 'J'; not to be confused with happiness, although they may be experienced together. How do we define this joy?

Henri Nouwen puts it this way: while happiness usually depends on circumstances, joy runs deeper. "Joy," he writes, "is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing - sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death — can take that love away." Thus joy and sorrow can not only coexist; joy can even be found in the midst of sorrowful circumstances."

Isaiah's poem talks of joy: he says the desert shall rejoice and blossom with joy and singing. Drought-stricken land will be filled with streams and pools. People's bodies will be mended so they can sing and dance; those who have been in captivity will be free and full of joy and gladness for ever.

This is a dream, right? A very nice dream, perhaps; some lovely wishful thinking, maybe. It doesn't sound very much like the world we live in, so is it a promise that hasn't happened yet?

Mary's Song, the Magnificat, reads like another promise or prophecy that has yet to be fulfilled. The mighty don't seem to have been cast down from their thrones; there are still hungry people and rich people who won't help them.

James urges us to be patient as we wait for the coming of the Lord, and we talk a lot about waiting during Advent. What are we waiting for? Are we waiting for a better world- or just waiting for Christmas Day to be over so we can relax a bit?

Then there's poor John the Baptist, stuck in prison, waiting for Herod to decide his fate. He's had a lot of time to think, behind bars, so no wonder doubt has crept in. He asked his friends to go and talk to Jesus and ask the Big Question: "Are you the One? Or should we wait for someone else?"

That John should ask this question shows its importance. He knew Jesus, he recognised him, he baptised him, so surely he should know whether Jesus is the real thing!

John had been hearing about what Jesus was doing, and it didn't make sense. It wasn't what he'd been expecting a Messiah to do; and it certainly wasn't helping him, locked up in prison.

John's question for Jesus is at the heart of both Christian faith generally and the Advent season in particular: Are you the one?

And so, it's all the more striking that Jesus doesn't answer the question directly. He doesn't say, I am, that's me. In fact, he doesn't speak at all to John; he doesn't say, "Tell John that I said such and such".

Instead, he says, “Tell John what you hear and see”. Miraculous healing, the poor have good news brought to them, and so on — a clear reminder of Isaiah’s description of the promised age to come. It’s as if Jesus says, “Tell John about the joy you hear and see — it speaks for itself!”

By answering in terms that evoke Isaiah, Jesus sets his messiahship within a much larger context. It’s as if he says, first, ‘To understand who I am, you have to look through the ancient lens given to us by Isaiah. And at the same time, second, Don’t focus too much on me personally — I’m here to herald something much bigger than one person. Focus on the signs of revival and abundance you hear and see, the signs of the new era I’ve come to proclaim: the Realm of Heaven is at hand! Look! The long-promised day of joy is dawning, and that joy is breaking out everywhere — visible signs of joy, joy you can hear and see and touch! Tell John THAT!’

Jesus responds to John’s question and to our questions this way: If you have eyes to see and ears to hear, if you can experience even this broken world of prisons and conflict and disappointment and sorrow through the ancient poetry of Isaiah, then you’ll know the new day has dawned. It’s not yet fully arrived, of course, but the signs of life are clear: glimpses of heaven, occasions for joy even now!

Saint Augustine defined a sacrament as a “visible word” and a “visible sign of invisible grace.” This week’s readings push us to see sacramentally: to see in the first Advent, a visible sign of the second; in Christmas, a visible sign of the Realm of Heaven; and in whatever particular restorations and joys we hear and see around us, sacraments of the Great Restoration and “everlasting joy” to come.

The church is called not just to “hear and see” such sacramental glimpses of restoration and joy, but also to become such sacramental glimpses ourselves, to become visible, audible, encouraging signs for a weary, fearful world. Be strong, do not fear! And above all: Rejoice!

Tonight our service of Nine Lessons and Carols will end with the singing of ‘Joy to the World!’, which Isaac Watts wrote as a forward-looking celebration not only of the first Advent, but also of the second. “Let every heart prepare him room” is an Advent sentiment if there ever was one. “Joy to the World” is an Advent hymn!

Advent isn’t only a “not yet” season; it’s also an “already” season- or, more precisely, it’s a season made for vividly experiencing the “already/not yet” tension at the heart of Christian life.

We call for Jesus to come — and celebrate his presence even now. We take anticipatory joy in Christmas — and remember that in this broken world, we still await that future coming when “sorrow and sighing shall flee away”.

May all who come here be surprised by joy as we rejoice and worship the One who was, who is, and who is to come. The Lord be with you.

From Isaiah 35

*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus
it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.....
Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
‘Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.....*

*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.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;
the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*