

Pastor's Message – 12/11/2022

Isaiah 35:1-10

Luke 1:47-55

This Sunday is only December 11, but for people who follow the church year, we are already at the 3rd Sunday in Advent and well on our way to Christmas. We are deep into our journey toward Christmas, and there are many temptations and challenges that may be distracting people from a focus on birth of our Savior into this world. On this third Sunday of Advent as we continue to prepare for Christmas, we are now only fourteen days out. The normal and not so normal things of life still go on, and people may be experiencing many different feelings.

Christmas magnifies the emotions: loss, grief, depression, happiness, euphoria. People are living at opposite ends of the emotional spectrum and everywhere in between – swinging back and forth as the day comes nearer.

For many people, Christmas is an extremely painful time of the year. Old hurts, new hurts, grief, and anger can bubble to the surface. Loneliness is rampant, and as families gather, family emotions, past and present escalate, so can family quarrels. So much to do; it can be a time of tension and stress.

The Israelites in exile in Babylon to whom Isaiah sang his song may have been caught in a tension as we are – not for the same reasons we are, but they were also looking forward with expectation and anticipation. On the one hand, they were making their homes in a strange land of Babylon where they were exiles, just as God had instructed them to do through the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 29). On the other hand, they were still longing for the homes they had reason to suspect were destroyed. They wanted to be content where they were; and at the same time, they wanted this exile to end. But no end appeared in sight.

But by the time of Isaiah, Israel's history had revealed a tragic cycle of failure in living up to that mission. The people had drifted away from the God who chose them to other gods and to self-serving patterns of sin and neglect of both others and the land. As a result, God would separate the people from the land, and both would suffer greatly under the weight of God's judgment. The remnant of Israel would go to exile in Babylon, and the land would fall into neglect and disrepair.

But even in the midst of that separation, God promises a great restoration of both land and people. Biblically speaking, humanity and creation are inseparably joined. Each is dependent on the other, and both are dependent on God. Isaiah reveals God's promise of a future time when the exiles would return and both land and people would be healed - a time when "they shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God" (Isaiah 35:2).

Isaiah describes the healing effects of God's completed reclamation project on both the land and the people. The weak and the fearful are strengthened and reassured (v. 3-4). Those dealing with disease and infirmities find their health restored (vv. 5-6). Water will break forth in the desert (v. 7). Moreover, God will provide a road in the desert, a way home for all those who have been far away and separated from God (vv. 8-10). The "ransomed by the Lord will return. They will enter Jerusalem singing, crowned with

everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be filled with joy and gladness." (v. 10).

The people in Jesus' day were still looking for this promise to come true. Yes, some of the exiles did return within a generation, but they found themselves in a land still under foreign domination where much of the fruit of the land went to feed their captors. They continued to live under a cloud of fear, a weak client nation under the thumb of Rome. The sick and the broken still haunted the periphery of society. It was clear that God's promises hadn't yet become reality.

For many today, reality looks different for different people. Christmas functions like an emotional magnifying glass. Whatever anyone is feeling – whether it is happiness and excitement, or grief and loneliness – gets made larger or more acute. The person next to you may be feeling the opposite of what you are. But we need both energies in the Church at Christmas – we need the longing and anticipation and the hope of better things, and we need the excitement of realized joy. The people who are feeling good and strong need to bring their strength and those who are feeling despair or grief need to bring that too. It goes back to Isaiah and that longing.

In the midst of that longing, Jesus steps onto the scene: Israel's true Messiah and the Word of God made flesh. When read through the lens of Jesus, Isaiah's promises come into sharp focus:

- Jesus went into the dry wilderness but was not conquered by it. He found food and sustenance in God and revealed God's glory in himself.
- Jesus strengthened "feeble knees" and calmed the fears of the anxious and broken.
- He opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped the ears of the deaf, called the lame to walk, opened the mouths of the speechless.
- He became "living water" for those dying of spiritual thirst (John 4) and proclaimed that he was "the way" in which people return to God (John 14:6).
- He faced the "ravenous beasts" of human sin at the cross, and yet returned from the dead.

When the prophecy to the Israelites we read today was delivered, it must have seemed at best like a crazy dream. The Syrian Desert turned into a glade? Spring flowers where the bulbs must have dried into a powder centuries ago? How can a people be strong and not afraid when they've been uprooted and now are doing the best they can to survive in a land where their language, their religion and their cultural customs make little sense? And a highway built from Babylon to Jerusalem? No one goes from Babylon straight back to Judea for good reason—it's a desert!

Crazy, simply crazy. Such reversals are impossible!

Unless they're not. Unless, that is, this *is* the word of God.

I read a wonderful story a while ago about a peasant, his wife, and their tiny cottage. The place was simply too small. They never had guests because there was no room at the table. They couldn't raise a family because there was no place for children to sleep. There was barely room for the two of them in that house, and they were starting to get in each other's way and on each other's nerves. They needed a bigger house.

Well, as luck - and fairy tales - would have it, a wizard arrived to grant their desires. "You shall have a bigger house," he said, "but first you must do as I tell you."

"First," he instructed, "you must bring all your chickens, ducks, geese, and fowl into the house with you. Next, bring in the dogs and the cats and the pigs and the cows and the horses and the goat." Well, the peasant and his wife pushed, and they shoved, and they squeezed them all tight - and still the wizard demanded they do more.

"Now," he proclaimed, "invite all your neighbors - and all of their animals, too. Put on a feast for them, and by tonight you shall have your big house."

It didn't seem possible that the entire neighborhood could fit into the overstuffed cottage, but the invitations were sent and soon the banquet had begun. It was a noisy and crowded affair, but a festive one. Eventually, every neighbor, beast, fish, and fowl had been welcomed, wined, and dined.

When all had finished and bade their farewells, the peasant and his wife collapsed in happy exhaustion and put up their feet to rest. It was then that they noticed how spacious their home had become. There was actually room to stretch out and relax. The wizard had granted their wish.

Their complaints, their longing, their dissatisfactions had suddenly disappeared. How would you feel if suddenly you were strong and healed in the broken areas of your life? What joy would be present in your life or could you bring to the world?

That's what we hear in Mary's song in the reading from the gospel of Luke today. There is no more potent song in all of the Bible expressing the expectation of God turning the world upside down than Mary's song.

Mary's story is a classic Cinderella story. You remember Cinderella: the heroine of the popular fairy tale, who is treated as a menial drudge by her stepmother and stepsisters but who eventually marries the prince. Each of the stepsisters is meaner and uglier than the other one. Yet each one thinks the handsome and wonderful prince should choose her. But it is not so. The one most ignored, the one most mistreated, the one who is least likely is the one who is chosen.

Scripture doesn't report any acting on the part of either Elizabeth or Mary, but Elizabeth is the one who should have been chosen. When people heard this story, the first time they heard the story they knew it should have been Elizabeth. Elizabeth is the aristocrat; Mary is a peasant nobody from a place unknown. Elizabeth has served her time, she is the senior; Mary is young and inexperienced. Elizabeth should be the central actor in this story; and Mary is chosen.

It's not a surprise to us, because we've heard this story so many times before. But time and again, God picks an outsider or an unlikely candidate for a special purpose: you may recall Joseph and his multi-colored coat. His brothers were upset with Joseph because Joseph had not served his time. He was too young.

You may recall the unlikely David, who was made to tend sheep while his brothers made speeches and collected contributions for the kingship campaign fund. He was ignored, until it was clear God chose him to slay Goliath over the more likely candidates.

You may remember Jacob of the Bible, who steals the birthright of his brother. Think about tiny Israel -- biblical Israel -- a country of unknowns and nobodies, chosen by

God. They weren't chosen because they were strong and powerful. No. They were chosen because they were weak and the least likely to be chosen for anything of significance. Look at Mary. She is an unknown peasant girl, and God chooses her to be the mother of Jesus the Christ, the king people were eagerly anticipating. Every one of them is chosen by God to be a sign that God can do a mighty thing through one who is least likely to be successful. God will do what God wants to do.

God constantly chooses the unlikely. When God chooses these unknown people, it demonstrates that by grace, not by merit, people find honor. So, it is no surprise to us, two thousand years later, that God chooses unknown Mary over the deserving Elizabeth. Or is it?

The Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever. (Luke 1:49-55)

These words highlight a season of reversals. God turns our world around. Lowly Mary has found favor with God; God chooses her. She is a powerful sign of a world turned upside-down. Mary's song gives voice to a vision of a new world; a world in which the lowly, the unlikely, the outsiders are lifted to thrones, brought to important places, and given honor.

It reminds me of the story of the church drama troupe that presented, as a special event on the weekend before Christmas, a "dessert and drama" production of Charles Dickens' classic "A Christmas Carol." The church fellowship hall was transformed into a theater, folding chairs clustered around tables, all facing a makeshift stage fitted with painted backdrops of the tenements and sooty chimneys of nineteenth-century London.

When the audience gathered and were handed their programs, some were amused to note that the part of the tightfisted Ebenezer Scrooge was being played by the chairman of the church board, a gentle man of quite un-Scrooge-like generosity. They were impressed, though, by the skill and energy he brought to his part. He growled his way through the opening scenes, ringing out every "Bah! Humbug!" with miserly ill will. He shivered with fright and dreadful self-recognition as he was encountered by the series of Christmas ghosts.

The final scene called for a transformed and jubilant Scrooge to chase away the shadows of the night and to greet the light of Christmas Day by flinging open his bedroom window and calling festively to the startled city street below, "Me-e-r-rr-y Christmas, everyone! Me-e-r-ry Christmas!" Then Scrooge, wishing to bestow Christmas gifts upon the needy of London and looking for someone to help dispense his cheer, was to act as if he had spied a street urchin passing by. "Hey you, boy, you there!" the mirthful Scrooge was about to shout, pointing vigorously at this imaginary figure. "Come up here, boy. I've got something wonderful for you to do!"

But something beautiful and unexpected happened. When the radiant and transformed Scrooge beckoned from the window "Come up here, boy, I've got something wonderful for you to do," a six-year-old boy in the audience, seated with his family who were members of the congregation, spontaneously rose from his chair in response to this jubilant and generous call and walked on stage, ready to do "something wonderful."

The actor playing Scrooge blinked in disbelief. There was now an unscripted child from the audience standing on center stage. What to do? The audience held its breath. Then the person of faith beneath the veneer of Scrooge took charge. Bounding down from his window perch, he strode across the stage and cheerily embraced the waiting boy. "Yes, indeed," he exclaimed, his voice full of blessing. "You are the one, the very one I had in mind." Then he gently led the boy back to his seat in the audience, returned to the stage, and resumed the play. When the curtain calls were held, it was, of course, this boy, the one who had felt himself personally summoned from his seat, who received, along with old Ebenezer himself, the audience's loudest and warmest applause.

That's why we remember Mary, too. In fact, it's why Mary is chosen. Because without any hesitation, when the invitation is extended, she will walk to center stage and take her place in God's story. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." (Luke 1:47-48b).

What we want most desperately, I think, is a part in the story. Oh, we may not yet know that's what we want. But what we want is the opportunity to be part of God's story. At Christmas, a number of unexpected people, people like Mary and Joseph, are pushed onto the stage of human history. They are called to act major parts in the transformation of the world. Some must be coaxed, some come more willingly, and some step out in faith, without any hesitation when the invitation is made.

Once we receive and respond to the invitation, that's when we can make a difference. Someone said, "If you don't like the news, go out and make some." Advent reminds us again and again of the promises -- promises that only Jesus can fulfill. The season also invites us to think about how we can participate in God's total reclamation project for his creation. Jesus gathered the disciples around himself and taught them to do the very same things that he had done, training them to be workers for God's kingdom. We know that the kingdom isn't all the way here yet and won't be until Jesus returns, but in the meantime, we are called to make the world around us look more and more like his kingdom so that when it comes it won't be such a culture shock!

If we take that mission seriously, we can begin to see some of the ways we can take on God's project every day:

- We engage in projects that care for the basic needs of people through good stewardship of the earth's resources. We can help those in desert areas find clean drinking water and discover ways to promote sustainable food production.

- We look for ways to be involved in the lives of those who are physically limited and often pushed to the margins of society. Jesus spent time with those people and validated them, and so should we.

- We create a "Holy Way" for people to come to know Christ and his kingdom through ministries of evangelism and hospitality (Isaiah 35:8).

- We determine every day to help people attain "joy and gladness" and make "sorrow and sighing" flee away (v. 10).

On days symbolizing the twelve days of Christmas, one family I heard of gives special presents. On each of those days, as a way of sharing their Christmas love, they give a gift to a family with special needs; usually a family in what we would think is poverty. There's a turkey one day. There's other food for the table on another day. On one of the days, there are gifts for each family member, something for the home another day. There's some special gift for each of the twelve days of Christmas. The gifts are given silently, and anonymously, because the intention is not to call attention to the givers, but to incarnate God's love in our world today, to make God's love real. It's one small way in which we may align ourselves with the poor and with those who suffer. It's that kind of love which can keep us from a canned and sugary sweet Christmas, which won't get us what we want most desperately.

If we want to experience Christmas as Emanuel, God with us, it takes a heart waiting for God to fill it with love. With God's love filling our hearts, then we'll have a part in the Christmas miracle. We'll be the Christmas miracle when we give away what we have, that God might give us what we need -- a little child who needs the warmth of our lives, the love of our hearts, and just a tiny place in which love can grow and prosper in our world.

The signs of the presence are all around us. Where do we see them? Do we see them? Are you a sign of God's presence in your family, at work, at school in the community, in your Church? When people hear your words, see your actions, and notice how you present yourself, do they see Jesus born again in you?

Throughout Advent, we're not just waiting for Christmas. We're waiting for the day when Jesus' love fills the world. As part of that waiting, we have things we can do. We look for ways that we can share Jesus' love with others, in acts of caring, helping and sharing. We do these things while we wait for the day when the whole world will live in God's way.

If someone gives you incredibly good news, you respond by uttering words that are proportionately appropriate to the greatness of the gift. Some of those words might include: "Magnificent!" "Excellent!" "Awesome!" "This is so awesome!" "Thank you so much!" "Wow!" "Great!" "You shouldn't have!" "Fabulous!" "Unbelievable!" "Incredible!" You get the idea. Mary begins her song with an "Awesome!" "My soul magnifies . . ." she says. Why was she praising God?

If Mary can praise God because of the soon-to-be-fulfilled promise, if the desert and the wilderness and the parched land and the crocus can rejoice in the promise of deliverance, how much more can we rejoice in the promise that has been fulfilled? How much can we celebrate that God has come to earth to be among us – to be one of us? Those who are sad will still be sad, but the sadness is bearable because of the great gift that has been given. Those who rejoice share their joy with others and the whole world repeats with Mary, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior . . . Great is our God and worthy to be praised."