

Third Sunday of Advent
Year B - 13/12/2020

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11
Psalm 126
1 Thessalonians 5:12-28
John 1:6-8, 19-28

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

In the comic strip Garfield, Odie, the beagle is asleep on the floor. Garfield walks up, lifts Odie's ear, and whispers, "Christmas is coming," then walks off. Odie is still asleep, but now there is a smile on his face and his tail is wagging nineteen to the dozen! As you perhaps have gathered over the past weeks of Advent, we are in the process of waiting - with much anticipation - for something to happen. This morning's readings begin to flesh out exactly what it is that we wait for; and why...

We can sometimes imagine that the Old Testament prophets only ever brought words of condemnation from God - reminding the people in no uncertain terms that they had sinned - or "done what was evil in the sight of God", as the phrase is so often put. Yet this morning's words from Isaiah give us cause to remember that this was not the only message they brought. And along with the particularly hopeful words of this morning's psalm, they serve to remind us of why this Sunday is one of joy.

These wonderful words of Isaiah anticipate a massive reversal of fortunes, wrought by the power of God. Through that reversal, which will reorder social power arrangements, those who are now abused and oppressed will be given a circumstance of well-being, joy, security, and prosperity.

The prophet announces a special vocation that has been given by God, a vocation that concerns the renewal of community. Three terms ground and identify that vocation:

(a) the work is authorized and energized by God's own Spirit; (b) the speaker is anointed, designated, and empowered by God; and (c) the work is to bring the gospel.

The speaker of this poem asserts that the good news willed by God has been given to us through an assignment to a human agent to work for transformation in the public domain.

It is just like the vision of transformation and renewal promised in the Psalm. The image is of one being "restored to life" - not a resurrection or a resuscitation, but a sense of how new life flows from God's grace. A people who have been in captivity; taken from their homeland and oppressed by foreign powers shall miraculously find themselves restored to their own land; that will discover that with God, even those who go out weeping shall return in gladness, with the new harvest in their possession.

These are wondrous texts for Advent: (a) They enact hope that a genuine, public transformation is in prospect; (b) They assert that the transformation willed by God depends on a concrete, human agent; and (c) when Jesus, in Luke's Gospel (Luke 4:18-19) chooses the text from Isaiah to read in the synagogue, he quite specifically claims it for his own definition and vocation. He is the one who will liberate the defeated. Jesus, the one who is pointed to by John in our Gospel is the one who will bring to fruition the plan wrought by God from the beginning of time.

If this promise seems remarkable to you, that is precisely the point. And the miraculous nature of God's mission, proclaimed through the prophets, and heralded by the angel, is promised to us.

It is the promise and the anticipation of Advent - that which is up will be down, while that which is not up will soon be raised. This theme is central to our season, and is found abundantly in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as in Samuel, and of course Isaiah and the Psalms, but the precise manner by which they are here related to the birth of Jesus helps us to understand the peculiar nature of this King who is to come and, as well, helps us to understand that the implications of his rule are both now and yet to come.

It is no coincidence that we light a pink candle today - that our over-arching theme is that of joy. For when faced with the realization that what God intends is for those in greatest need to be blessed it is a source of great joy and gladness.

So what of that word - joy. For we must see it as more than just happiness, although this emotion is certainly captured in the spirit of joy. But happiness, just by itself, does not do joy justice. For happiness can be fleeting - happiness is too easily influenced by external things; happiness can leave when the next sign of worry crosses our minds, reminding us of the things that weigh us down.

But joy is not like that. Joy is enduring. Joy says that, to use Paul's words from our Epistle, in all things, we are to give thanks - for this is the will of God through Christ Jesus.

The American Methodist pastor, Jim Harnish, perhaps describes it best when he says:

“The resonant laughter echoing from heaven is not cheap, shallow, watery frivolity; it is rich, deep, vivid joy. It is gladness that comes from the same place as suffering; joy that comes from the same place as tears. It is the joy of men and women who face the suffering, injustice and pain of the world in all its fury, but have taken hold of something stronger, deeper and more powerful.

They have grasped the assurance of the ultimate triumph of the goodness of God. They are of good cheer because they know that the power of God in Jesus Christ has overcome the world.”

And this is the joy we celebrate today, and the joy we claim. As Isaiah promised, “to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning”; as the psalmist says “those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.”

In that same spirit, so we look forward to the coming of our King. O come, o come, Emmanuel.

Amen