

Rejoice!

Advent 3 (A)

*Isaiah 35.1-10/Psalm 146/James 5.1-11 /Matthew 11.2-11*

St. Paul's Church, Halifax

16 December 2007

~Paul H. Friesen~

This is Third Sunday of Advent, *gaudete* Sunday, quite a mouthful! But it's not complicated at all, *gaudete* being the old European word which we translate 'joy' or 'rejoice'. This is 'joy Sunday' in Advent.

In the church of our ancestors, the church that gave birth to both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, the third Sunday in Advent was a joyful day. The colour switched from serious purple to bright pink to signal the Christian anticipation of Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Christ. The church experienced a flash of joy in the midst of its Advent repentance.

Flashes of joy are found throughout our Scriptures. We don't need to count on candles to remind us. But like a friendly face on a grey, depressing day, we appreciate all the joyful reminders we can get. So today is our reminder: self-examination, confession, and repentance don't need to drive joy out of our lives. Other things we do might be blamed for driving out joy, but not seeing the truth about ourselves, and repenting. This makes room for joy.

Isaiah the prophet, like John the Baptist, had an awful lot of very hard truths to tell to his people. He had to point out their self-righteousness and their hypocrisy, as well as their selfishness, and greed and carelessness.

But in the middle of it all Isaiah offered them joy, true joy, not little bits of happiness. He offered them the promises of God. And these promises are offered to us today, as the foundation of joy.

How did Isaiah put it? '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...they shall see the glory of the Lord.' The dry, cracked, salty, useless ground will sing with joy... it will begin to blossom, when it sees God coming.

Christ is coming, at the end of time, at Christmas, this afternoon.

If the idea of dry land sprouting with crocuses doesn't grab you, maybe the other words will. Isaiah said: '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.' Nothing could be more joyful than this.

The prophet said ‘Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened.’ When? Well, yes, it could be this afternoon that you and I see God and rejoice. That’s really, really important.

But Isaiah said this joy will come when God comes to judge... this joy will come in the midst of the times when God is speaking the truth to us. Joy costs something, but not money. The price of joy is being open to God’s judgement and our own repentance. And then that might mean changing the habits and priorities of our lives—how we use our energy, our time, and our resources.

The Apostle James echoes Isaiah. Most of us wish, at least some of the times, that the letter of James to the church wasn’t in the Bible. It just isn’t polite. And today’s reading is a good example. But though I don’t like it, it is in the Bible, and so as Christians we must hear it.

‘Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire.

You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.’

I think we all know that we are all amazingly rich by the standards of most of the world. We know that there is really no point in pointing fingers at each other in this church, or in any church in this city. We know that we all have a share, somehow, in what produces the ‘cries of the labourers’ that the Apostle James talks about. And we know that the connection between international trade and our own wealth is complicated, and real change is slow, sadly slow—like the movement that led to the end of the slave trade.

But there is so much room for joy in the midst of our repentance.

And to find it, we only need to look at the Gospel story of Jesus and John the Baptist.

John is not the fiery preacher of last week. He is in jail, and he is depressed, because he is feeling the consequences of telling the truth to powerful people who didn’t want to hear the truth—particularly King Herod, who didn’t want to hear about his own adultery.

John the Baptist is depressed. He has sent his disciples to ask Jesus, the Messiah, the one John himself said was the lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world—this same John the Baptist has sent his disciples to ask Jesus: ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ This wasn’t turning out the way John thought it would. Was there sarcasm in his question? Possibly. Was there despair? Certainly.

John needed a flash of joy; he needed to remember that it isn't he who carried the weight of delivering the kingdom, but Jesus.

He needed to know that his point of view which felt so real to him was limiting him, preventing his joy. So Jesus gives John the best answer he can, the answer that Jesus offers us today, on the Sunday of Joy in Advent.

Jesus answered [John's disciples]: '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.'

Jesus isn't mad at John. He tells the crowd that John is the greatest of the prophet—a strong spiritual man, a true messenger of God.

But Jesus sends a message to John: Do you want joy? Do you really want joy? Open your eyes and see what God is doing in the midst of judgement! Look at the blind and the deaf and the lame and the lepers! See them see, and hear, and walk, and be full of health! Don't take offence—don't confuse your circumstances and your perspectives with what God is actually doing.

Jesus said to John, and he says to us. Look for joy, and when you find the joyful who have been healed and cleansed and made whole, rejoice with them—enter into their joy!

Are any of us looking for joy this morning—even just a flash of light in our dark sky? Today Jesus tells us what to do to find it.

Find it in the people you cannot help but meet this week.

My four year old is a Christian, a pretty little Christian, but a Christian none the less. And I almost missed the flash of joy she brought into my sky this week, as a fellow Christian who was rejoicing.

When Janet and I were first married and I was in Seminary studying I had great plans for our devotional life—long periods of intense biblical study and fervent prayer together early every morning. I soon realized, with her help, that what works well for one person, might not work at all for another.

So apart from our own thoughts and prayers and scriptures, our shared spiritual life has eventually evolved into sharing coffee and tea silently, in bed, when we have had all the sleep we can get—which of course is never enough. And then when we read a short psalm, or a part of a psalm, twice—perhaps sharing a thought or two, or perhaps simply hearing the words. And then one of us might offer our own prayer or read a prayer written by someone who was more awake when she did it. And then we sing the Lord's Prayer, the modern version, with one of the modern tunes. This little devotion might take 5-6 minutes or it might take 15 minutes—some days it is broken off part way through for reasons

impossible to ignore. Some days we might not even be able to begin it. But we enjoy it and find it helpful.

And to make it work our four-year-old knows that after she has entered the room, and gently whispered in our ears and then jumped on us several times—then she must go to the Lego pile a few feet from the bed and play, while Mom and Dad continue their few minutes together. The plan even works some times.

On Tuesday it worked till we got to the Lord's Prayer, and begin to sing in our croaky voices—and were joined by our daughter's stuffed cat who began to sing with our daughter's voice: Meow, Meow, Meow-Meow-Meow-Meow...I wasn't charmed, I didn't think it was cute, she has a very loud voice.

I was about to cut her off with 'can't Mommy and Daddy have a few minutes together'. And then I realized something.

In that moment, she was our bolt to joy, the pink candle, the flash of light, on a dark Advent morning which would open into a day of busyness and stress, offering all she had while she dutifully played looking the other direction. Jesus said: 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight...the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' The Apostle Paul put it another way: 'Rejoice with those who rejoice.' If you want joy, look and listen for the joy around you and enter into it. And if they're grown ups, ask them why they are joyful!

The second flash of joy this week came to me after several trips to the bank and several late evening calls to customer service. It was after I had lost my bank card, and the temporary card wouldn't work with our on-line banking programme—though everyone said it should. I was getting a little frustrated by the time I talked to the last support person the last evening.

Here I was a grouchy middle-aged guy talking to a young telephone support person, perhaps thousands of miles away. And before anger got the better of me, I suddenly realized, by her persistent good will, that she liked her job. She went beyond the call of duty and fixed things so that they would work—not as they should, but the best way possible. She even called me back with further details. She was rejoicing—I think she was a Christian, but if not, she understood how to rejoice with her job. And I was obligated to rejoice with her. Once I saw this, I couldn't help it.

Jesus said: 'Go tell John what you see...The poor have the good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.' What will we do when we see joy in the midst of accepting God's call to repentance? We have a chance to find out in the Lord's Supper, right now. And we will have chances in all the 'John the Baptist moments' that come our way this week.