

Advent 3 Year A

Readings: Isaiah 35: 1 – 10

Luke 1: 47 – 55

James 5: 7 – 10

Matthew 11: 2 – 11

On this third Sunday in Advent, the focus is on joy as we await the arrival of Jesus. I've heard people comment to me, and I've said it myself, that as we have grown older, there doesn't seem to be the same excitement or joy in preparing for Christmas. The Christmas

cheer in us doesn't seem as evident as it once was.

How many of us can relate to what I've just said?

Around about this time, the busyness and madness of Christmas preparations can seem joyless rather than joyful. Who enjoys standing in long shopping queues? Who enjoys being stuck in traffic jams or crawling traffic on our roads? Who enjoys driving around and around trying to find parking? Who enjoys seeing their bank account drop more and more as spending gets out of

control? Who enjoys being stressed out on having to organize and coordinate festivities?

But there may also be a joylessness for those who have nothing to do and who experience Christmas preparations on their own. Who among us really enjoys celebrating Christmas alone? One may want to avoid the hustle and bustle of Christmas preparations, but who really enjoys disconnecting from others at around this time? Who really enjoys having nothing to look forward to?

As we prepare and think about the coming of God to us in Jesus, how joyful is this for us?

How good is this news for people who have no joy?

For Isaiah, joy for the people of God was tied to God's activity; particularly God's saving and restorative activity in their times of great distress. From the poem of chapter 35, there are hints referring to those returning home to Israel from exile: "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray...but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall

return, and come to Zion with singing” (vv.8-10).

We notice that those making their way home are called the “redeemed” and “ransomed.” It is tempting to read such powerful words in terms of religious status or spiritual transformation. But, “to redeem” (Heb. *gā’al*) comes from the realm of family law and refers to buying back someone from slavery – a person or property from debt (Ruth 3:13; Lev. 25:33), and an animal from a sacrificial obligation (Lev. 25:33). Likewise, “ransom” (Heb. *pādâ*) is an economic and cultic term for buying back a person or animal from an

obligation (Ex. 13:13, 15). Both these terms are used commonly in the Exodus traditions referring to the Lord's reclaiming Israel from Egyptian bondage.

So the language used here in Isaiah is rooted in concrete realities, as in being set free from political captivity. The "redeemed" and the "ransomed of the Lord," are people who have been released by the Lord's intervention – from Babylon and elsewhere – and thus are free to return home to Zion.

So it is from traumatic and painful experiences that God's people respond to

God's intervention with joy. For those leaving their captivity for the freedom of home, they shall "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" (v.10).

This "everlasting joy" is connected to God and what God does. But it's not merely a spiritual or religious experience. The joy that Isaiah speaks of is one that is connected to real experiences, real events in people's lives. For those who emphasise the political, economic and social force of the language, release from captivity and reestablishment in

one's own land certainly have spiritual and emotional dimensions to joy. It is a joy of those who recognize that they have been set free – set free by the power of God, and changed because of it.

And it is this joy that sustains their hope. Even when having to return home through the desert and wilderness, rather than being overwhelmed by the testing conditions, the hope and joy of the people turns any negativity upside down. In dry and arid terrain, they persevere as though streams flow in the desert (v.6c-7), plants blossom and flourish (v.1-2), their physical strength

renewed, and mobility fully restored (vv.5-6b).

This spirit of hope and joy in testing times is what James encourages the early Christians in his letter. He encourages them to be patient or to have endurance as they await the “coming of the Lord” (Jas. 5:7). In using the example of a farmer who relies on the regular seasonal rain for a good crop, James proposes that the faithful must also rely on God for the fulfilment of God’s purpose for them and through them in spite of their suffering. The urge for them not to “grumble against one another” (v.9) is thought to characterize the

sighing of people who live in situations of oppression. The sad thing here, is that it seems as though Christians are mistreating each other. But James does not talk about some general virtue of patience; rather the patience he refers to is that of suffering people who know that God, as judge, will intervene and uphold them. What God will do becomes the source of their hope and joy.

Hope and joy was also fundamental to Mary's experience of what God did in her life. Unmarried and pregnant, she had every reason to be fearful of her future. The words of the angel to her "Do not be afraid" (Lk. 1:30)

sums up the reality of someone in her situation – a situation that would cause much shame and grief in 1st century Palestinian society.

Yet, when perceiving that God was at work in her most challenging circumstances, Mary's attitude and response, like those in our Isaiah reading, are turned upside down. Instead of retreating into the darkness of hopelessness, isolation and silence, Mary breaks forth into joyful song: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (Lk. 1:46, 47). In her song, she declares the goodness of God in the life of the people God,

and particularly for the lowly, the hungry; those enslaved politically, economically, socially and spiritually. These are the ones who cannot help themselves, but need the saving presence and intervention of the God who redeems the captives. From the desperate experiences that have weighed her down, Mary believes God has raised her up. God “has looked on the lowliness of his servant...The Mighty One has done great things for me” (v.48, 49). No longer a captive to fear, Mary’s joy in God granted her the confidence to understand that God works in ways that are sometimes against all expectations – even through someone as lowly and as insignificant as her.

In some respects, this was also a challenge to someone as outspoken and fearless as John the Baptist. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, John preached repentance and warned people of judgement. "The ax," he said was "lying at the root of the trees" of those who do not bear the fruits of repentance (Mt. 3: 8, 10). For John, the promised Messiah would come to baptize with the fire of judgement.

Yet, now in prison he receives reports about what the Messiah is doing. Somehow, his expectations of a Messiah of judgement are turned upside down. Perhaps dejected and

discouraged by his imprisonment, John needs to be sure. So he sends his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one?” Jesus’ response is, “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 offense at me” (Mt. 11:4-6).

Jesus’ response is an opportunity for him to say something about himself. He is not a Messiah who would stop crime and punish criminals, or wage war against the enemy armies of Israel. Instead his primary activity is

the restoration of the needy and the giving of life to the lifeless. Like John, others may have shared his seeming uncertainty: “Are you the one...or are we to wait for another?”

What Jesus says and does reflects and fulfills what Isaiah 35 declared. But the challenge for John when hearing this is, does the redeeming work of this Messiah of God bring him joy or not? For someone who is held captive, is the good news for the poor good news for him? Does new life for the lifeless bring him hope for true life in God? And does he believe that by a change in his thinking about Jesus, he is blessed for not taking offense at him? Does he

have hope and joy in spite of his testing circumstances?

We can have the worst of experiences at times, making us feel miserable and unhappy. But it does not mean we are alone, without any hope for a change for the better and for joy. Emmanuel – God with us, is at work in our life; even at our lowest point. Although we may not easily recognize this or accept it, it doesn't stop God's redeeming work in us. As the saying goes, "When you've reached rock bottom, the only way is up." And this is when we begin to know what hope and true joy is. I think we've all been there at one time

or another. But every time, God has been there with us. So every time, we have reason to rejoice. Amen.