

“Interrupted by Joy”

December 11, 2022

Rev. Wendy MacLean
Wall Street United Church

Isaiah 35: 1-10 NRSV

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.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

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. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.’

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; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

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 traveller, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

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.

Matthew 11: 1-6 NRSV

Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.

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.’

Advent Calendar theology: When one door closes, another opens, and another, another....(if there is chocolate involved...)

Holy One, Child of Life, Spirit of Gentleness,
In these weeks of Advent, we wait for something.

We are not quite sure what to expect.

Is it birth? Is it the coming of Christ, again?

Is it the transformation of our hearts and the healing of our world?

Oh, yes, Lord, we are longing for this peace and we live in hope that by your grace, the new day will come.

Sing into our hearts your song of joy.

Teach us the words to your ancient melody of love’s blessing.

Find us willing to recognize you, as you come to us,
with hands reaching out, and hunger and your ways of meeting us
where we are most vulnerable.

Tender Lord, may you find our hearts open to your gifts.

Be in my words, may they be true and faithful to the gospel. And may our understandings be a blessing to you. AMEN

There is a tree on the corner near where I live, that is plump with berries (or tiny crab-apples). They are beautiful to see in December: a shock of red in the midst of grey, a place where birds will feast as the winter wears on. The Sunday of Advent that celebrates Joy is a bit like that tree: it interrupts the serious season of spiritual preparation (hope-peace) with a call to rejoice. This is not the HO! HO! HO! holly-jolly festive fun of Christmas. It isn't even based on happiness.

It is a response drawn from deep in our spirits: Joy arises from the ancient spark of the Divine, that is part of each one of us.

Interesting—the most human part of us is the divine spark which is life itself: we cannot be separated from the love of God.

Joy bubbles up from this source. Like water in the desert.

Like streams that break forth in the wilderness.

Joy is not based on happiness, it is based on confidence. Joy is not even a feeling, it is a response to the conviction—the faith—that even in the midst of darkness or hard times, we can trust God is with us.

We trust in the coming of a new freedom and love. Joy comes with the dawn, even after a night of tears. The Psalmist assures us: Joy comes with the dawn.

This may be why the 3rd candle we light in the Advent wreath is pink: like the light of the first dawn, it reminds us of a new day that is almost here. Rejoice! This is good news!

So what do we expect for this new day? What kind of perfect kingdom will come with the Messiah? Why are we rejoicing? What is the source of our everlasting joy?

In the prophecy we read this morning, from Isaiah, we hear his reassurances: 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.

Isaiah is writing to a people who have been taken from their homes, into exile in Babylon. He is prophesying their return to the Holy Land. He is painting a rosy picture. But all these beautiful promises of flowers and healing are interrupted with the fierce presence of God: a vengeful God. The God of divine retribution. *“Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, and terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”*

For victims of violence, for political prisoners, for refugees who have been exiled from their countries, or are running for their very lives; this is good news. God's vengeance will liberate and save them. Rejoice!

Whew—this makes me a bit uncomfortable.

We have to be very, very careful, when we attribute motives to God.

We cannot think like God.

But if we try—and the scriptures help us—we get a glimpse of the vengeance of God.

It looks like the blind being able to see.

It looks like the lame being able to dance.

It looks like the desert blooming.

It looks like a baby, not a king, saving the world.

'Vengeance is mine', saith the LORD. You may have heard that said about "The God of the Old Testament." (and then heard, that OUR God is a God of love.") But if we really trust that "vengeance is God's", then we find a whole new freedom. It is not our business.

Leave it to God. Let go and let God. Trust God's love.

When we are in troubling relationships, it is tempting to desire revenge. "I hope they get what they deserve," is a very human thought. If we are wise, we realize we have no power over them (it is not our business to punish them).

If we are really wise, we see that the best revenge is for us to be FREE of wanting revenge.

The best revenge is for us to be happy. To draw on the JOY in our souls, that makes us rich. Joy that springs from God's irreversible love. This is ours not because of anything we do –not reward or punishment-- *but because God draws close*—especially to the broken hearted. Because we are created with this spark of life in our souls.

The world is holding its breath as the Russian and Ukrainian forces engage in brutal war. We talk about winning a war, but there are no winners in war. War stops, people lay down their arms, and the fighting stops. But to "win" a war, both sides must win: everyone –EVERYONE—must be freed to live in peace. This is the promise of the Second Coming: a new age where there is no fear, no hunger, no need for revenge.

But we are not there yet. So why, and how can we rejoice?

The first step is to recognize that the person who hurt us—our enemy—is human. This does not sound radical, but the movement from thinking of someone as an animal or a monster, to a human being—is profound. It

starts a shift in our souls that begins to open us to healing. We are “humanized” in the process.

As Christians we live in the strange miracle of God becoming human in Jesus. In our lifetime, we can trust that God is present in our most human moments. In worship and prayer we invite our souls to remember God coming as one of us, as a baby, as a man, as a friend.

I had a parishioner I used to jokingly call “The Resurrection Man.” He loved to ride his bike, and he played the fiddle in a community band. One day he was hit by a drunk driver—a young man who should never have been driving. John was seriously injured, we almost lost him—and he was in a coma or two weeks and in Intensive Care for several weeks.

When he started to recover, he had two wishes. He wanted to be able to bend so he could pick strawberries on Wolfe Island. And he wanted to talk to the young man who hit him, who was also in the hospital.

One day when he was well enough to sit in a wheelchair, I asked him why he wanted to see the person who had caused him so much pain. John was very concerned about this young man. “I want to be sure he never does it again.”

There was not an ounce of resentment or bitterness in John’s wish. He really cared about how this young man’s life would unfold.

How could John have the heart to be so forgiving? He was still in pain, but springing up from his heart, like flowers in the desert, was the divine spark of life—God’s life in him. It gave him the strength he needed to heal. This is the nature of JOY: like a spring of water, refreshing our spirits, giving us what we need to live freely in God’s love.

Jesus asked his disciples about John the Baptist. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? A prophet?”

Someone in a wheelchair, with a catheter and an oxygen pole?

Watch for the messengers, my friends. Like John the Baptist, they are preparing the way for a new day. Watch for the messengers!

The last time I saw John he was riding his bicycle in downtown Kingston.

Tell him: The blind see, the deaf hear, and the lame ride bicycles.

This is the good news of the gospel. Rejoice!