

### Third Sunday of Advent: December 11, 2022

The Rev. Nat Johnson

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Canticle 15

“The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,” envisions Isaiah, “the desert shall rejoice and blossom” (Is. 35:1). In the alternative for our Psalm reading, we hear Mary singing, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my Spirit rejoices in God my savior!” (Canticle 15, BCP). These are fitting images for this Third Sunday in Advent, traditionally associated with joy and gladness. It is a break from the solemnity of the other Sundays in this season, a bit of reprieve from the warnings of God’s coming judgment and exhortations to repent. For those of us who mark the passage of time during Advent using a wreath, there is a tradition of using a pink, rather than purple, candle – a visual reminder of the different thematic focus on this Sunday. In each set of readings used for this Sunday in our three-year cycle, there is an invitation, an imperative, to “rejoice,” to be full of exuberant joy – not for just any reason at all, but specifically because the coming of the Lord is near: the Third Sunday of Advent is a reminder that that for which we prepare is not to be feared but to be the source of our joy *and* the ground of our hope.

I will admit that I often find it easier to remain in the shadows of Advent’s long night than to break into the radiance of joy in this season of preparation. I can relate more readily to Jesus’ warnings about the coming wars and rumors of wars, about John’s challenge to the religious and social elites to produce fruit worthy of repentance, than I can to the joy that reverberates through Isaiah’s vision and Mary’s song. Through articles and newsclips, I see a world full of violence and injustice: communities of color who live under constant threat and oppression; LGBTQ folks who fear gathering in public; the poor ostracized and ignored; immigrants maligned as murderers and terrorists; homes, livelihoods, and communities destroyed by the ecological consequences of greed and indecision.

There is enough in any one news cycle to convince me that the need for God to establish justice and peace is beyond great in our present moments. In the face of so much devastation, I wonder if I even have the right to embody joy. More than that, I wonder how joy fits into the desolate landscape of our social and political context in which we are so very deeply divided, where so many are left without even the basic human necessities like shelter, food, water, safety, and healthcare.

I suspect John the baptizer would be able to sympathize with this wondering. We have skipped ahead in Matthew’s storyline, from the unwavering conviction about his role in preparing the way for the One who is to come, to John’s pointed question delivered to Jesus: “*are* you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” What has happened in the time since John’s testimony was so firm to this point in the story, when questions and doubt seem to shroud his expectations and his convictions?

Immediately following the gospel passage we read last week, Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John; and John witnesses first-hand the divine origin of Jesus’ identity and mission when a voice from heaven declared Jesus as God’s beloved Son. In the intervening time between then and when our current story picks up, John was arrested and imprisoned. This is not a predicament that he anticipated in light of his heralding duties meant to prepare the way of the Lord. If Jesus was really the one who was to come, why wasn’t the world being righted and he liberated from his cell?

If we’re honest, I suspect each of us has carried the weight of that question at some point in our lives: what difference does Jesus make in the world, and if he was supposed to have inaugurated a new

creation in which peace reigns, why is there still so much violence and injustice? If Jesus' gospel was truly good news for the poor, why does inequity still seem to be unfixable? Why does our world seem to be stuck in a downward spiral going to hell in a handbasket? For John and for many in our world today, it seems that the powers and influence of Empire have won another day leaving us with little more than doubt, longing, and expectations unfulfilled.

In response to John's question (and ours), Jesus points to the ministry in which he's already been engaged. Since his baptism, Jesus has been bringing healing, liberation, and restoration. He has restored sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, healed the lame, and exorcised demons. In the face of John's doubt, Jesus reminds him to consider the evidence of his ministry and to decide for himself if Jesus is really the one who is to come. John's own story underscores the unexpectedness of God's reign – the coming of God's word in the wilderness rather than in the halls of power and the institutions that govern our lives. Jesus points our attention to the places in our communities, our nation, our world that bear signs of life amidst the dry and desolate landscape of our social-political context.

Perhaps John was simply looking for the wrong kind of evidence. He couldn't reconcile his expectations of Jesus' coming with the reality that he experienced. Though he was sent to prepare the way of the Lord, he now had to receive Jesus as he came. And I wonder if this isn't part of our invitation as well today, to learn how to shift from preparing the way to receiving the gift of God-with-us. What expectations do we have of Jesus – of the work he has done and the work he continues to do through the Spirit of God? Are we looking, in vain, for signs of God's presence and reign in the systems and structures of our political and social lives? Or are we willing to look in unexpected places, in the ordinary miracles of everyday life? Is it possible to see signs of life, of transformation and renewal: in the hungry who are fed, in the naked who are clothed, in the sick who are healed, in the liberation of the oppressed?

+++

Joy is a funny thing. We confuse it so often with happiness. And, in our culture, this is often something that has been commodified. At the very least, it is a byproduct of our purchasing power, something we secure for ourselves in our habits of consumption. Joy and happiness are framed as the result of satisfaction and being full. But I suspect that Isaiah, Mary, and John might teach us something different. In each of their cases, they were mired in uncertainty, bearing the weight and pressure of an occupied state, and living under the constant threat of violence. And yet, Mary sings of the greatness of God, rejoicing in her savior. She recognizes that the Coming One will upend her world *in order to* bring about its transformation.

Joy, for Mary (and for Isaiah) blossoms not because she has somehow mustered its existence in her soul, but because she recognizes the faithfulness of the One who makes the promises of healing, liberation, and restoration. Isaiah reminds us that the righting of the world will not happen through our efforts, through political campaigns or military might – salvation cannot be manufactured by human effort. It is solely dependent upon God and God's mercy, compassion, and grace. Salvation is not just about getting humans out of hell and into heaven – as Isaiah envisions it, it is global in scope, bringing pools of water to the thirsty and dry ground, blossoming life in desolate places.

As we enter our third week of Advent, I wonder how you might cultivate the practice of joy in your lives, in your homes, in your work. What signs of new life do you recognize in yourself, in your communities, in the world? Joy comes when we live into the hope we have in Christ. Every time we participate in healing; every time we experience liberation from the shackles of racism and homophobia, from addiction, from toxic relationships; every time we experience the wholeness that comes from restoration. We live into the hope of God's promises here and now – in the midst of a world that pushes

up against the visions of prophets like Isaiah. Every time we breakthrough barriers of separation and demonstrate God's love through mutuality and compassion, hope is revealed as alive and the God whom we worship is powerfully present.

In the collect assigned by the Book of Common Prayer for this Sunday, we pray that God would "stir up God's power and with great might come among us." This is my prayer for us today, dear People of Grace: not only that God's power would be stirred up among us, but that we would have eyes to see and ears to hear how God is already at work in our midst. May God grant us the grace to notice the signs of life all around us, and may we receive the gift of life with joy and gladness! Amen.