

"Waiting in Joy"
The Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2020
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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
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For a moment the other day, the world felt normal.

A little bit after six the other evening, I was walking our dog, Toby. An Amazon delivery driver was running between houses, and I shouted, "Santa is keeping you busy!" He laughed, and then walked up a bit closer and said, "I have treats for your dog if he can have them."

It was the magic word. Toby sat down and looked at the delivery driver in eager, joyful anticipation.

For a brief moment the world felt normal again.

On this Third Sunday of Advent, there is little about our world that feels normal to us. We are a people in exile, displaced from each other and from the traditions which we normally enjoy. There are no caroling parties this Christmas, no parties period. There are no pageants, no cantatas, not even a bright red poinsettia.

Nothing seems normal to us on this Third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday we traditionally call the "rejoicing" Sunday. At one time Advent was seen as a time of repentance, much like Lent. It was a longer season, filled with moments of penitence and contrition. The Third Sunday became a break from all of that weeping and gnashing of teeth. It was a day of rejoicing – a day when the church lights the pink candle and remembers the joy Mary felt as Jesus kicked and moved in her womb, a day for recalling the deep promise of joy that shines brightly over the hopes and fears of all the years. It was known as "Gaudete" Sunday (gow-DET-eh), from the Latin word for rejoice. On this day we heed Paul's admonition to rejoice in the Lord always.

In other years it feels easier to rejoice. on this Sunday we would rejoice at the sight of bathrobe-clad shepherds. We would rejoice at the angelic hosts of little ones bedecked with wings, and with a steely-faced Joseph, himself a little bit too old for the play, but conscripted anyway at the last minute because his mom was a Sunday school teacher and the kid who was supposed to be Joseph got the flu.

In other years, we might rejoice by telling corny one-liners like "Why were mummies so excited about Christmas?" (Answer: because they're really into wrapping.) Or, "How much did Santa pay for that new sleigh?" (Answer: nothing, of course, because it was on the house!)

Tis the season we say – but this year it may feel as we need more Sundays for rejoicing rather than the single pink-candle day. I joked with a friend the other day that I am hoping that God will deliver the new year to us wrapped with one of those bands of paper they used to use in hotel bathrooms that says, “Sanitized for your protection!”

This year is different: the pandemic is flying out of control, and we are tired of wearing masks. We are weary of not gathering with families and done with not going out to eat. We are eager for the vaccine’s arrival, though many are uncertain of whether it can be trusted. This year is different because the hardship and economic burdens are greater than anytime in our history.

This year is different, and we are yearning for the promise of God’s joyful redemption.

But what we do not need is some sort of made up joy that is sprayed out like holiday-scented air freshener. We do not need silly jokes as much as we need to the promise of restoration. We need the joy that comes from the assurance of God’s promise. That promise is more than an bright lights and shining tinsel: it is the joy that arises from amazing promise that the discomfited will be comforted, as Walter Brueggemann says (*The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 71).

It is that joyful experience of God’s goodness which prompts the Servant of God to stand among the ruins of his world and announce God’s call to proclaim good news.

This is the promise which makes us laugh and rejoice, because, as that old country comedian Grady Nutt would say, “Laughter is the hand of God on the shoulders of a troubled world.”

A young man that I know texted me a theological conundrum the other day. His question was honest and probing. It was also troubling and for that reason I have struggled on how to answer. His question was, “How do we know God is good?”

I have thought all week about that question. It is a question that weighs heavy on the shoulders of this troubled world. It is a question that dances with our struggles to rejoice. It arises from the smoldering despair of our difficulties. I believe it was also the question asked by those who have experienced exile, just as those to whom Isaiah speaks in chapter 61. `

Isaiah, as I have said before, is not a single book written by one prophet, but more likely a compilation of at least two if not three sets of writings. Chapters 1-39 imagine the time before or leading up to the Babylonian Exile, which happened around the collapse of Jerusalem in 587. The world of Israel fell apart. Chapters 40-66 were written after Israel had been released from captivity. If the earlier chapters were about giving up, these chapters are about receiving the new thing that God is about to do.¹ In these chapters, a servant is identified who will bring God’s deliverance and bring relief to God’s people in pain.

These chapters point us to my friend’s question: is God good?

¹ See, for example, Walter Brueggemann, “Hopeful Imagination,” p. 4

Now there was no clear line dividing these time frames. Things just didn't go back to normal. In fact, things at times got worse. I think that is a cautionary lesson for us. We hope, we pray, we expect that the pandemic will end. It will. But how that will happen is uncertain. We wait, therefore, for that newness to emerge.

But our waiting is not a time to sit still.

Instead, our waiting this Advent is a time for responding with joy to the promise that our God is coming. This God will level the playing field between the rich and powerful and the impoverished and poor. This God fills the hungry with good things, as Mary says in Luke 1:53. This God levels the unequal places of our world and calls us to rejoice with hope.

He is the one in whom we rejoice. He is the one of whom John the Baptist spoke. The servant of God, the one who speaks comfort to the grieving and brings healing to the brokenhearted.

Jesus, we sing, what a wonderful child! Come, let us adore him! On Christmas day, earth shall sing! A son is given, a child is born for us. And we shall rejoice.

Like any child, the arrival of this servant prompts us into action—even when we do not know what we are doing.

Some thirty years ago, before we had our own children, Carol and I helped a friend of ours who found herself suddenly single with a three-month-old son. One morning, with tears in our eyes, she dropped him at our house and told us that she only had one diaper in his diaper bag. "Could you buy some more?," even though she had no money. She left for work, and Carol and I, baby in tow, headed to Wal Mart. Because Princeton Seminary lacked classes on caring for infants, what we did not know is that diapers came in different sizes. Unsure of how much he weighed, we ended up holding our friend's son up to the packages to see if we could figure out which size to buy. We made quite a sight in the diaper aisle—and I'm sure more than one mother ran away from us in fear.

We did not know what we were doing, and so we laughed. We laughed so hard that tears filled our eyes. We laughed so hard that even the baby belly laughed, squealing in joy at the incredulity of our circumstances.

There are times when it is difficult to rejoice. There are times when it does not seem as though God is good. But it is in these moments that the church remembers its calling, lifting its voice, energized in hope.

More than any other time in our lives, the song of God's redemption and joy must be sung by the people who know it best. More than any other time in our lives, the church must be renewed by hope in Jesus Christ so that we may do those very things the servant is called to do: comforting, releasing, transforming.

We do this remembering that with God, all things are possible! Amen.

