

"AWAITING THE JOY"

Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11
December 11, 2006 -- Advent 3

Isaiah 35

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus {2} 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. {3} Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. {4} 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." {5} Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; {6} 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; {7} 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. {8} 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. {9} 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. {10} 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.

James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. {8} You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. {9} Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! {10} As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples {3} and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" {4} Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: {5} 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. {6} And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." {7} As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? {8} What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. {9} What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. {10} This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' {11} Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

There's this kid who worked after school in High School and now that he's in college on Friday afternoons and Saturdays in a coffee shop on the main street of a small town in eastern NC who thinks his boss is a really great guy. His boss is his Uncle Jake. About this time every year the kid shares this story with about anyone who comes in the shop. He's been telling it for a few years now and for some reason once the Christmas decorations go up, right after thanksgiving some of the regulars who come in ask to hear the story again. He shares it like Uncle Jake shared it him. 'There's an old woman who came and sat on the bench in front of the shop every day around around 3. She sits there on the bench out front for about an hour, sometimes two, knitting and waiting. Busses come and go from the depot about a half a block away as she watches intently, but she never gets on and she never greets anyone who is getting off. She just knits and waits. Jake says, "I took a cup of coffee over to her one day and sat with her for awhile. She told me that her son is in the Navy. She last saw him almost 3 years ago when he left town on one of these buses. He's stationed up in Norfolk and he's married now and he and his new wife have a baby daughter.' The woman has never met the daughter-in-law or seen her grandchild and they're the only family she has. Uncle Jake would slip out of the shop, bring her a cup of coffee and sit down with her. She told him a lot about her life. About her husband's death. About her sorrows which she said were no worse than anyone else's sorrow. But here she was, sitting on a bench, watching the

buses come and go. One afternoon Uncle Jake's curiosity got the better of him and he asked why she kept coming back, day after day after day. She told him in her thick eastern NC accent, "I'm waitin' for the joy." He said, 'pardon me' and she said slower, "I'm waitin' for the Joy." "Oh" he said, "waiting for the joy....what's that mean, exactly?" She said, "You know, waiting for that thing in your life that will bring you more joy than ever." "So why wait here on this bench?", I asked. "It helps to come here and wait. I pray for them as I knit little things for the baby, and I imagine them in their tiny apartment on the base. I just know they're saving their money to come see me. I'll just have to wait. Maybe next Christmas. I've got to tell you, the waiting is awful!" '

Uncle Jake continues the story, "I'll never forget the day 'I looked out there and there they were getting off the bus. You should have seen the look on her face when they hugged her, when she saw her grandchild for the first time. It was the nearest thing to pure joy that I ever hope to see. She doesn't have to wait any longer. I'll never forget that look for as long as I live. If that's what joy looks like....it must be a wonderful feeling!"

Uncle Jake's nephew pauses for a moment before he said, "When I came back the next day Uncle Jake was in his usual place behind the counter, whistling, greeting customers like they were all long lost friends. Before he could say anything, or even hand me my apron, I looked him in the eye and said to him, 'You sent her son

the money for the bus tickets didn't you?' He looked at me with eyes full of love and a smile that was the nearest thing to complete joy that I have ever seen, and said, 'yeah, I sent him the money.' I'll never forget that look for as long as I live.'

This story is what Advent is all about. It's about the human condition. It's about Joy rising up out of sorrow. Advent is all about waiting -- for circumstances to change, it is all about the great release that enables rejoicing in the salvation that comes to us. When the hope becomes reality. Joy that's unlike any other joy ever experienced. Joy that comes out of the depths of human sorrow. Joy that comes in the fulfillment of the promise of God.

It's Isaiah, a prophet for a people who have watched and waited for the Lord to come and save them. It's when 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 majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees." This is the promise of Isaiah: that the dessert be transformed into a glorious place, that those who have waited shall see the glory of the Lord. The eyes of the blind shall be opened, the deaf shall hear, the lame leap like a deer, those who were mute will sing for joy. And all of this will happen because God has seen the suffering of God's people and God will send them relief.

Like church of James, we still await the final realization of Isaiah's prophecy. We know in our living that the presence and power of God affects change as the Messiah comes. He may not do the expected things. But it is in God's province to work out God's will however God will. God's will brings joy.

There is, then, potential for an amazing Advent drama to be worked out before our very eyes in these days. You have to look for it, watch for it, wait for it – but it is there. It is in the good deed done, the act of kindness offered with no expectation of any return, the softening of the heart, the eager anticipation on a child's face.

This is what Advent is about: It is about how God has come to us in Christ. And how Christ has reconciled us to God. And it is about the promise of Christ coming again and the consummation of the promises of God. But Advent is also about God coming to us in the present. About how God in Christ works out God's will and purpose in the now too allow us a glimpse of, a taste of this exceeding great joy...now. And allows us to participate.

In the gospel for the day, John was in jail, and he could see his own demise just around the corner. So he sent his friends to find Jesus and put the question to him once and for all: "Are you the one? Or shall we look for another?" John is imprisoned by the waiting. Not like waiting in line or for a stop light to change. But waiting to hear news that will change the world – his world – our world. Waiting to hear the biopsy report, or waiting up after midnight for your teenager who's running

late after curfew, or waiting for medicine to take effect when you're not sure you can take another breath. It's Advent waiting – pregnant waiting that begins with such excitement and then drags on as you wait for the pain to come and go, wait for the hope and promise to be made real.

We, like John, are imprisoned in our waiting. Sorrow, illness, anxious hearts, mental illness, depression, physical pain. Waiting for relief. Waiting for something to penetrate the bars of my pain, the walls of my disappointments, the barriers of my loneliness, the fortress of my fears, the grip of my grief? Waiting with John to see, to know “Are you the one, or shall we look for another?”

And in our waiting we hear again the echo of the good news John heard and the good news Advent brings to us. Jesus said, '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.' Jesus is saying that talk is cheap, it is actions, actions predicted by Isaiah, who preceded John, that mean something. It is action that affects our joy.

Today as we, too, wait for the coming of the Lord, the good news for us in Advent is how the Lord comes to us and serves us now, in the here and now, even as we wait patiently.

During this Advent we, all of us, have an opportunity to carry this message to God's people who languish in loneliness, in despair, in weakness, in illness, in

faintness of heart. We can say by what we do that we believe that in Christ there can be a transformation of the wilderness of our human dilemma, in to a good news message that shows in action that God is coming to us.

In Advent as we give alternative gifts and do acts of kindness and find within us the extraordinary capacity to love and to serve and to give we discover that we are recipients of Advent good news and also like Uncle Jake and like John, made able to sharing the story, share the hope, make the difference and for others and for ourselves we get to see a glimpse, we get to feel the elation, we get to experience hope realized and peace offered and joy in an unworldly kind of abundance – even as the waiting continues. That’s what Advent is – experiencing God in the here and now while waiting for what is to yet to come. The Advent of a kind of joy the world hasn’t known since the night in Bethlehem when the angels sang and shepherds came and Mary thought about days to come.

The joy is ours – wait in faith – for it to come.