

Joy: A Stubborn Promise

Isaiah 35:1-10

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I.

Why is it that joy, our theme for this third Sunday in the season of Advent, is so hard to come by?

When I say “joy is hard to come by,” I mean the kind of joy that can’t be faked or fabricated.

That kind of joy is organic and overwhelming and – can I say this in a sermon? – sometimes even orgasmic. (I guess I just did.)

Joy in the Christian tradition is not just another word for happiness or contentment. Joy is a full body, full mind, full heart, full soul state of being.

And joy in the Bible is never simply an individual’s experience.

It is always related to the well-being of the larger community of people.

Even Mary’s song found in the first chapter of Luke isn’t just the song of young woman who finds herself to be unexpectedly pregnant.

Mary’s *Magnificat* was first sung generations before Mary by women like Hannah.

It was a song passed down through a community of women spanning centuries.

When Mary sings it, she does so in community with her relative Elizabeth.

This is not the song of an individual’s private joy, but the song of expectant women overwhelmed by the promise of new life.

And the content of Mary’s song addresses the well-being of the wider community.

More specifically, her song introduces a series of reversals:

- instead of rewarding those who are shrewd and conniving, God scatters them;
- those who sit in board rooms at the top of their towers are forced onto the street so that those with no power can move on up;
- those who starve in a besieged city are treated to a banquet of fresh and sustainably produced food, while those who’ve never known hunger are forced to fast awhile.

We could add our own imagined reversals:

- the jobless get corner offices,
- the Department of Defense becomes the Department of Peace,

- kid president becomes the real president and the slogan “Don’t be in a party. Be a party” becomes the rally cry for world peace, universal fairness, and good times.

The joy magnified by Mary and generations of poor and powerless women before and after her is a joy that imagines a common good fully realized.

In other words, this is a joy that comes from the creative act of anticipating a day when God will turn the world upside down, a day when God will shake up and reorder the prevailing power relations, a day when the poor will have resources, and the rich will know what it is to want, a day when the hungry will eat well, and the well-fed will hunger for justice, a day when the voiceless will speak and be heard, and those who have dominated the airtime will discover a capacity to listen and be moved.

II.

But is this all just “pie in the sky” thinking?

Does it resist or replicate what is being called our “post-truth” society?

Some critics of religion say that religion allows people to escape from the real world, ignores the facts on the ground, and replaces reality with a hoped-for future world that does not, and may never, exist.

When Marx called religion the “opiate of the masses,” he had in mind that religion kept people in their place, maintained the status quo, and, like opium, numbed people to reality of the material world.

I wonder if Marx and other critics would say the same thing about art.

Doesn’t art in its various forms create a false version of reality?

Is a film real life?

Does a painting reveal or ignore what is?

What about poetry?

Is reality fixed or do we construct it as we go?

I am asking these questions because I want to know whether Mary’s song and countless other acts of hope-filled imagination, are acts of truth-telling or just well-constructed lies.

I am asking because it seems to me that lies are carrying the day right now in our country and in our world, and yet something tells me – I think it’s faith – that God’s truth is more real, deeper and more reliable than any of our half-truths, and that art plays a role in revealing the steadfast beauty underneath the ugly veneer that dominates our imagination at present.

III.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann was put on the spot by a questioner who pointed out that the scholar talks about scripture differently depending on whether the audience is mainly conservative or mainly liberal.

“When I talk to conservatives, I tell them that scripture is an act of imagination,”

Brueggemann replied, “When I talk to liberals, I tell them it is the Word of God.”

It seems that scripture is both authoritative and dynamic, trustworthy and creative.

As important as asking what a piece of scripture *means* is asking what does that piece of scripture *do*.

In Isaiah 35 what the scripture *does*, or tries to do, is to help people living in exile imagine a way through the wilderness to a place of well-being.

It does this not by describing reality, *per se*, but by describing a near and promising reality that could come to be if the people had the courage to go.

The people of Judah are living as exiles in Babylon.

They’ve been treated fairly well, but the cost has been the temptation to forsake their distinctive identity as people of a particular God and a particular place.

They’ve been given permission to return home to Zion, but they have not yet mustered the courage to go.

It’s a long way from Babylon to Zion. A vast and dry desert lies in-between here and there.

And there, Mt. Zion, that is, is apparently in shambles.

Why make the journey when you might die of thirst along the way?

Why bother when you may be disappointed when you arrive?

Why not settle in and forget your identity, forget your God, forget the promise?

Life in Babylon isn’t that bad – my children could get used to it here.

Now substitute “Life in Trump’s America isn’t that bad” – my children could get used to it here.

Will we have the courage to depart or will we settle in?

Isaiah, the artist, the poet, engages in a huge act of imagination to help the people see the deeper reality underneath their present circumstances.

This is no lie that obscures truth but an act of beauty that reveals a vaster and more lasting truth.

And that is one reliable way to test between falsehood and truth-telling – lies promise only short-term returns, but the truth has staying power.

Isaiah describes the foreboding desert, a bleak place with few resources to sustain life.

Try imagining his words conveyed in a painting, or choreographed in a dance, or composed in a piece of music, or sculpted from clay, or whatever artistic form speaks to you.

The wilderness and the dry land shall not threaten you – they shall be glad.
As you cross the desert, it shall rejoice and blossom.
Like a crocus peeking up out of nowhere from the cracked soil, the desert shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.
There's our word – Joy – a poetic construction, yes, but can you feel the truth in it, or at least your longing for the truth of it.
An act of imagination that is at the same time the true Word of God.

As a weary people begin to make their way through the desert, it blooms, the beauty of its flowers causing their courage and resolve to grow.

Now the poet gives four strong imperatives: strengthen, make firm, speak, be strong. Imagine if those became the imperatives of the church and all its partners – the masjid and the temple and the synagogue and the meeting of compassionate freethinkers – to strengthen weak hands, to make firm feeble knees, to speak encouragement to those who are afraid, to be strong and not to fear.
Why? Because God is right here, traveling with us, making the journey through the wilderness, and our God is not a wimp, does not back down and give up, is ready to make a stand on behalf of the weak and the vulnerable.

And now, taking his cues from women like Hannah, the poet Isaiah offers a list of reversals:

The eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf unstopped,
The lame shall leap like a deer,
The tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

There's our word again – Joy – not pie in the sky but food on the table – a reassertion of the stubborn promises that are God's alone to make and God's alone to fulfill.

The poem continues: The deadly desert will teem with life in surprising ways. Waters will well up in the wadi, lush streams will appear in the parched beds. Sand too hot to touch will cool into a refreshing pool and wells of water will spring up in the driest places.
Where jackals once gnawed on bones, there will be a swamp with reeds and rushes and a cool wind blowing them back and forth.

And finally, the poem reaches its culmination and climax, its full expression of joy, a joy whose purpose is to get a people to move from their settled condition in Babylon to the stubborn promise of renewed life in Zion.

Isaiah recycles and reasserts a familiar image – I know you’ve heard it before:

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way.

Not a single track trail, but a huge highway right through the middle of the desert, a holy way where all God’s people make their return.

And good news for those of you who are geographically challenged – no traveler, Isaiah says, not even fools, shall go astray.

Even fools are welcome to make the return trip.

And, even better, there will be no lions lying in wait, no ravenous beasts.

The redeemed and the ransomed, the people who figured out that life in Babylon was not real life, will walk along the wide, safe, highway, with flowers blooming on either side, and along the way to Zion, they will start singing, and their songs won’t be dirges because everlasting joy will be on their heads.

As they approach their destination, joy and gladness shall overwhelm them, and sorrow and sighing, Isaiah says, sorrow and sighing will be no more.

IV.

Anticipated joy is not just the outcome of a promise fulfilled, it is the means by which people of faith engage in God’s good news.

The stubborn promise of joy is what gets us to depart from the quiet resignation of Babylon and to begin our journey to the wellness of Zion.

Joy reveals steadfast truth – flowers blooming in the desert – and refuses to succumb to fleeting lies.

During Advent, Mary’s joy becomes our own.

And I would even suggest that true joy is always shared joy, so the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth becomes a model for the church.

Whenever we come together, we share the joy of our pregnancy.

The good news of Emmanuel is not yet here, but we bear him in our very bodies, and his birth will be the birth of what is real and good and true.

Amen.