

SERMON: "JOY TO THE WORLD"

SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 35:1-10

DATE: SEPTEMBER 6, 2015

Isaiah 35:1-10 (NIV)

The desert and the parched land will be glad;

the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.

Like the crocus,² it will burst into bloom;

it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,

the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;

they will see the glory of the Lord,

the splendor of our God.

³ Strengthen the feeble hands,

steady the knees that give way;

⁴ say to those with fearful hearts,

"Be strong, do not fear;

your God will come,

he will come with vengeance;

with divine retribution

he will come to save you."

⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer,

and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness

and streams in the desert.

⁷ The burning sand will become a pool,

the thirsty ground bubbling springs.

In the haunts where jackals once lay,

grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

⁸ And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.
⁹ No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
¹⁰ and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Picture with me Lucy and Linus from the Peanuts cartoon strip.

Lucy asks Linus, "Why do you suppose people are here, anyway?"

Linus answers, "Someone said that every person is on earth to make someone else happy."

Lucy ponders that for a moment and then screams out, "Well, somebody's not doing their job!"

Given the reports on TV and the newspapers of people in difficulty, Lucy is not alone in feeling let down. In our politically correct society people are still being marginalized---being isolated from food, shelter, power and hope.

The working poor, the single parent on welfare, the homeless, the street kid, the mentally ill, the family of an alcoholic, the child going back and forth between separated parents, the refugee, the list goes on and on.

We live in a society that is increasingly dividing people into haves and have nots. Such a division breaks apart whatever sense of community exists amongst people. It builds walls of misunderstanding that lead to isolation, not just of those with problems, but everyone isolating themselves in cocoons of self-protection.

Such divisions occur in society. They can even occur in the Church.

Isaiah 35:1-10 reminds us of the power of God to transform the harshest setting and bring about a joy that is deep and lasting.

Isaiah saw, in a vision, the wondrous power of God to bring life where there is nothingness and joy where there is hopelessness. In his vision, the desert was brought to bloom and the wilderness became a paradise.

The result is overwhelming joy because the Lord can and will do such amazing things for those whom God loves.

Listen to these verses which capture the mood of the entire passage:

Vss. 1-2 "The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon

will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendour of our God."

Vs. 10 "and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."

The power to transform.
The power to offer hope.
The power to bring joy.

That's the power that Isaiah saw and proclaimed.

It's the power that transformed the Son of God into a helpless, vulnerable baby.

It's the power that transformed simple, uneducated men and women into disciples who first followed Jesus and then led vast numbers of people to Him.

It's the power that transformed an instrument of torture and death---the Cross---into a throne for the one who conquered sin and death.

It's the power that transformed a frightened group of believers, who thought they had lost their leader, into the most dynamic, faithful religious force the world has ever known.

It's the power that transforms the brokenness of people with their pain and problems into people who know that, no matter what they face, they are not alone.

It's the power that transforms a situation which seems beyond desperate and breathes new strength, courage and hope into it.

It's the power that has made and continues to make all the difference in the world.

There is a way back for those who feel in exile.

There is a community for those who feel isolated.

There is an oasis for those who are wandering in the wilderness.

There is a hope for those who feel squeezed out to the margins of our society.

Armin Gesswein has said, "When God is about to do something great, he starts with a difficulty. When he is about to do something truly magnificent, he starts with an impossibility."

The way back--the community---the oasis---the hope are all founded on an impossibility---the impossible truth that the Lord God Almighty was born as an infant in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago.

No other events in history are as important as the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

No other events in history are as important because everything about Jesus Christ calls out to us that God cares.

God cares and God will do whatever needs to be done to show each and every one of us that we are loved unconditionally and we are never alone.

Steven Hall put it this way in an imagined dialogue between God and Satan:

"The two stood facing each other. God robed in light, each thread glowing. Satan canopied in evil, the very fabric of his robe seeming to crawl. Satan rose slowly off his haunches. Like a wary wolf, he walked a wide circle toward the desk until he stood before the the Book of Life and read the word: Immanuel.

"Immanuel?" He muttered to himself. "God with us?"

The hooded head turned squarely toward the face of the Father.

"No, Not even you would do that. Not even you would go so far. The plan is bizarre! You don't know how dark I've made the Earth. It's putrid. It's evil. It's..."

"It's mine," proclaimed the King. "And I will reclaim what is mine."

"Why?" Satan asked. "Why would you do this?"

God's voice was deep and soft.

"Because I love them."

That truth is 2000 years old. Sadly, with age comes complacency. We hear that God loves us and that Jesus came to show that love but it stays with us almost like a memorization we recite by rote.

Let's take some time over the next week or so to reflect on what our lives would be like if there was no God to relate to---no God to call upon.

What would life be like if you had no faith---if you had never had faith?

What would it be like if there was no such thing as a church?

What would it be like if you had never met one another in this community of faith?

No Christmas.

No Easter.

No life after death.

No accountability beyond our own justice system.

No balancing of the injustices of life.

No sense that there is a power above us seeking to bring us good.

No understanding that life has been created from beyond ourselves.

No sense of life as something with meaning and purpose to be discovered.

No community of love and care to rest in and serve with.

What would life be like if God did not exist and if Jesus had never set foot on this earth?

Now, if we can tap into those feelings of loss, we can begin to see the reason that joy is a foundational part of Christian life.

The beloved carol says it well:

"Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing"

The Lord is come!

That has brought joy.

It has brought power for us to use to transform our world and the lives of those around us.

Using that power brings us even more joy!

Henri Nouwen wrote:

"Joy is hidden in compassion. The word compassion literally means "to suffer with."

It seems quite unlikely that suffering with another person would bring joy. Yet being with a person in pain, offering simple presence to someone in despair, sharing with a friend times of confusion and uncertainty...such experiences can bring us deep joy. Not happiness, not excitement, not great satisfaction, but the quiet joy of being there for someone else and living in deep solidarity with our brothers and sisters in this human family.

Often this is a solidarity in weakness, in brokenness, in woundedness, but it leads us to the center of joy, which is sharing our humanity with others."

There is unhappiness and despair in our society and our world. Lots of somebodies are not doing their job.

God has done God's job.

May we recognize that truth, with joy, and then allow our joy to overflow to transform the lives of others!

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