

Sermon – “Unforeseen Joy”

Sunday, December 11, 2022

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10, Matthew 11:2-11

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On this Third Sunday of Advent, our first scripture reading is Isaiah 35:1-10. In this chapter, Isaiah proclaims the inevitability of God’s salvation, even when we find ourselves at a great distance from Zion in situations that appear hopeless. The appearance of God, who brings both judgment and salvation, is described in the forces of nature. Hear now God’s word:

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. 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. Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. God will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. God will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 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; 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. 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. 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. 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. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 11:1-10. When John’s disciples ask Jesus on behalf of John, who is imprisoned, if he is the Messiah, Jesus does not answer with a simple yes or no. Rather, he draws parallels between Isaiah’s hope and his own ministry. Then Jesus affirms his beloved cousin John, the Baptist, whose ministry in the desert prepared the highway to the kingdom of heaven. Hear now God’s holy word.

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.' 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. Amen.

The title of the meditation: “Unforeseen Joy”

*The text: The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.
Isaiah 35:1*

Let us pray: O Lord our God, in this Advent Season, thank you for the promise of your Spirit working within our lives, even in times of drought and dormancy. Remind us again of who you are and who you call us to be that we may rejoice and stay strong in each season and circumstance within our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

A desert bloom is a climactic phenomenon that occurs in various deserts around the world in early spring. The unforeseen joy of a variety of flowers blossoming in the middle of an arid desert is caused by an unusual level of rainfall which reaches the dormant seeds and bulbs beneath the sand, commencing them to germinate and to flower. As a poignant illustration, centerpieces from last week’s Advent Celebration were dormant bulbs ripe for our families to water into bloom during this season.

The prophet Isaiah chooses the majesty, wonder, and beauty of a desert bloom as a metaphor to foretell the unforeseen joy of theophany—the long-awaited manifestation of God to the people of Judea who find themselves in a dry and foreign land during their exile. The unforeseen joy of blossoming flowers in the heart of the desert speaks to the character and nature of God who makes all things new.

It also gives voice to the unexpected personal growth and maturity that blossom out of the wilderness and desert experiences we each persevere. Often it is only in retrospect that we see God’s Spirit at work during these times. We look back, we reminisce, and we marvel at how these desolate and dark times have fostered a resilience and a strength that make us whole and who we are today.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks words of comfort and hope to the people of Judah during their Babylonian exile. Their tears have watered dormant seeds during their time in the desert, preparing the unforeseen joy of unexpected bloom, spiritual transformation, and the highway home.

The central theme in Isaiah 35 is unforeseen joy and hope even at times of apparent hopelessness. The radical reversals of nature and humanity presented to the reader underscore how our present experience cannot be the final word on the character or reliability of God’s salvation.

Such a perspective of faithful people provides buoyancy in the face of perennial suffering. The community of the faithful believes the will of God for the well-being of the world will indeed prevail over all that is distorted, evil, and pathological. The hope of messianic possibility works against our exhaustion, our despair, and our pessimism.

Memory forms the basis of this hope and sustains the people of Judah through the desert. Their memory recalls a long and distinguished story of Yahweh’s judgement transformed into redemption and a wellspring of new beginnings. Because the people of Judah remembered the story and knew that life could never be lived apart from Yahweh, they sheltered strong hopes

and expectations about both the present and the future. They remembered their former joy, and that remembrance enabled them to see beyond their present tears to unforeseen joy.

Like Judah of old, the church remembers God's long and distinguished story; however, ours are memories vested in Jesus of Nazareth---in his birth, in his life, in what the disciples of John heard and saw, and in Christ's redemptive death and resurrection. Because we remember what God has done in the Savior born to Mary in the bleak midwinter, we also have certain hopes and expectations concerning what God can and will do.

In embracing this unforeseen joy, *Christians are distinguished both from the despairing, who believe nothing can change, and from the self-sufficient, who believe they themselves will work the newness. Our life, against both temptations, is directed to the reality of God, the very God whom we discern in our present and to whom we entrust our future.* (Texts for Preaching – A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV Year A, page 19-20)

The God who causes *the desert to rejoice and blossom* is the God of our unforeseen joy who opens the eyes of the blind, who unstops the ears of the deaf; and who delights when the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. The God of Zion is the God of resurrection and a wellspring of new beginnings who waters the blooms of creation and builds a highway through the desert of each of our lives. Remember the story of our faith, my friends, have hope, be at peace, blossom, and rejoice. Amen.