

1

We've been together a little over three months now, and we have come to the end of one thing and will begin a new adventure next Sunday. Maybe you noticed that I have preached only from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we often call the Old Testament. I have been using what's called the Narrative Lectionary on which to focus my reflections each week. It begins with the Old Testament in the fall, and then moves to the New Testament in Advent. Next fall we begin again, using a cycle of four years to hear and tell amazing stories from the entire Bible, from the beginning to the end.

The Narrative Lectionary reminds us that the Bible is filled with the story of God interacting with us humans, and like any good story, it flows from the beginning, to the middle, and to the end. Rather than jumping from one place to another each Sunday, we are on a path that began in the beginning and now approaches the middle of the story, the birth of Jesus.

This week ends our journey in the Old Testament by reflecting on the words from the prophet Isaiah. As we wait for the birth of Jesus, this week we sit in exile

with Isaiah, waiting with him and God's people as they long for joy to return to their lives.

This passage seems a bit odd to read on the third Sunday of Advent, don't you think? We're supposed to be focusing on joy, and yet, Isaiah and the people were in exile, taken away from their homes by a leader focused on the power to control them by displacing them from their homes. By removing leaders from their communities, the king could place his own leadership to control the land and the rest of the people. Hear again what Isaiah lamented in the words we heard read this morning: "Foreigners will stay and shepherd your sheep, and strangers will be your farmers and vinedressers" (61:5).

It would be like someone removing our mayor and city council and replacing them with foreign leaders, or someone taking over Tom Christophel's farm and renaming all his cows. This would not be a joyful event, so what do we do with this text on the third week of Advent, when we are supposed to be preparing for a joyous event but instead we find God's people sitting in exile?

2

Can't we just jump to the Christmas story instead? Wouldn't it be easier to avoid the waiting? What joy is there in waiting anyway?

Waiting had been difficult for eight-year-old Harold, but one Sunday in church something happened. It was during the minister's prayer that everyone heard a loud whistle coming from Harold. His mother shushed him into silence, and after church she asked, "Harold, why did you whistle in church?"

Harold replied, "I've been waiting a long time to learn how to whistle, and I prayed that God would teach me how. And He just then did."

Isaiah may not have been waiting to learn how to whistle, but he was waiting for some joy in the midst of exile. While waiting, God sent Isaiah to speak these joyful words to the people:

The LORD God's spirit is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me.
He has sent me
to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners,

Hundreds of years later when Jesus was an adult and went to the temple, he was asked to read the day's scripture. He read these words from Isaiah, words about being anointed to bring good news to the poor.

The people were probably smiling, pleased that their hometown boy was reading scripture for worship, but do you remember what happened in the rest of the story? After reading this scripture, he told the congregation, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it" (Lk. 4:21).

Then the murmuring began, "Isn't that Joseph and Mary's boy? How could he say such a thing about himself? He's just a carpenter's boy, but he calls himself the anointed one?" And then what happened? They tried to throw him off a hill, for they couldn't imagine their hometown boy being selected as a leader, as the anointed one.

When Isaiah spoke hundreds of years earlier of being anointed, he used the Hebrew word מָשַׁח *mashach* (maw-**shakh**), from which we get the word *messiah*, which means one anointed with oil. When someone was chosen to lead the people, such as a

3

king, olive oil would be poured on his head. He was anointed as their leader. Isaiah looked forward to a time when a leader would be anointed and free them from captivity.

But did you hear what else Isaiah said? He looked forward to the time when this anointed one would “give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning.”

Who normally wears a crown? A king or queen—a leader. But instead of a just a king wearing a crown, Isaiah looked forward to a time when the people would no longer wear ashes as a sign of sadness, they would instead wear a crown.

And not only that, they would have upon their heads the oil of gladness instead of sadness, the oil of joy. What happens when oil is placed on one’s head? One is anointed as a leader! Isaiah looked forward to the time when God’s people were all anointed to bring good news to the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, and prisoners!

Isaiah looked forward to today—to you and me, bringing joy into the world by how we care for one another and those searching for joy.

That’s not always an easy thing to do, is it? Especially in these weeks before Christmas when we seem so busy with shopping, decorating, baking cookies, and all the other activities of getting ready, we may not take time to see those around us who need a word of hope.

Authors John Flowers and Karen Vannoy noticed that churches often have a hard time in offering good news to the oppressed. They wrote:

Even church leaders well versed in Scripture had difficulty practicing Jesus’ teachings inside our four walls. There were frequent grumblings of, “Must we have these homeless people here on Sunday mornings?” ... some in the congregation wanted these ministries to be weekday ministries, anytime but Sunday mornings and anywhere but on our own property.

The authors then tell the story of one young woman’s transformation as she volunteered for their Sunday morning breakfast program. The week after returning from her mother’s funeral, she was pouring syrup in a bottle for the breakfast. She explained what happened that morning:

④

Tears just began flowing from my eyes when a homeless man asked me, “What’s wrong?” I simply told him I was sad because my mom had just died. He put his hand on my shoulder and said he was sorry. I realized, at that moment, that my sorrow did not have to be my own—but that others would share my pain and my joys. It was one of those transforming moments that completely got my attention.

The authors commented that “Real transformation happens when we realize the poor have as much to give us as we have to give them. Mutual transformation is when we are transformed together, rich and poor alike.”¹

I think that’s what Isaiah meant when he looked forward to the time when everyone would be anointed

with the oil of joy, when all of us—rich and poor alike—would offer hope and joy to one another. It’s not through the boxes or bows or the shopping mania, but by listening to one another, by hearing the stories of our struggles and joys, which can bring healing in those stressful times of life. Over 125 years ago Minister Charles Spurgeon once said:

There is a marvelous medicinal power in joy. Most medicines are distasteful; but this, which is the best of all medicines, is sweet to the taste, and comforting to the heart. This blessed joy is very contagious...the grace of joy is contagious. Holy joy will oil the wheels of your life’s machinery.²

During this Advent season, may you be anointed with the oil of joy and offer this gift to everyone seeking joy.

¹ John Flowers & Karen Vannoy, *Not Just a One-Night Stand Ministry with the Homeless*, as quoted in *Alive Now*, Nov./Dec. 2016, p. 26-7.

² <http://ministry127.com/resources/illustration/charles-spurgeon-on-joy>