

Advent 3

December 12, 2021

Isaiah was absolutely furious! His people, the people he loved, were on a path towards utter destruction. They were prioritizing their own petty agendas and ignoring the one thing that could save them. They had doubled down on fear and were shutting down their hearts, their minds, and their spirits.

Isaiah knew in the depths of his being that trust in God would pull them out of the tailspin they were in and put them on the path to Shalom. But they would not - maybe they could not - hear him. Instead, in an effort to comfort themselves, they chased things that made them feel good - wine, wealth, admiration - even if it meant that the most vulnerable among them would suffer. They pretended they were in charge of a world that was spinning out of control around them. In order to numb themselves even more to the suffering around them, they began treating other people, the land, even God as though they were things, means to an end to get what they wanted. It seemed they were separating themselves more and more from God, from each other, even from that still small voice within themselves that was calling them towards Home.

And their separation was leading them deeper and deeper into a conflict that would inevitably end in violence.

Walter Brueggeman says that “the book of Isaiah is ... about the suffering and destiny of Jerusalem. The city is regarded as the center of [God’s] peculiar attentiveness, as the seat of the world’s best hopes for well-being, and as the site of the most profound disobedience and recalcitrance.” The work spans the empires of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia and the consequences that each of those empires affected upon Jerusalem and its people. The text we are exploring today occurs in First Isaiah, in the eighth century BCE. The people of Judah are in the midst of war. Israel and Syria have joined forces against Judah - and the Judean King Ahaz chooses to form an alliance with Assyria rather than heed Isaiah’s warning to put his trust in God. Meanwhile, the sins of Judah are rampant. In one of his many rants against the disobedience of Jerusalem, Isaiah cries: “Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine, and valiant men in mixing strong drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of his right!” Isaiah can see the trajectory of his people and he fears that their faithlessness will lead them to Disaster.

And yet. Isaiah’s faith was greater than his anger. His hope was stronger than his disappointment. Even in the midst of his helpless rage, even as

he perceived God growing angrier by the minute, Isaiah believed in God's plan for Shalom. He could almost see it - and over and over he would break from his frenzied pleading and warnings to remind the people of God's Dream for them. His vitriol dissolved to reassurance as he described what could be if they would only abandon the doomed course they were following and commit to a radical trust in the God who had delivered their ancestors from slavery into freedom and from homelessness into belonging.

The text we just heard is an example of one of those visions of hope - of joy - of salvation - a vision Isaiah casts for his people. "With joy, you will draw water from the wells of salvation," he promises. Even in his anguish and despair, Isaiah can imagine a time of joy.

It was late spring/early summer. Maybe you were there. We had attempted a few in-person gatherings but kept getting shut down by the pandemic. Finally, most of our community had been vaccinated and the infectious rate was low. We gathered in this space, a small number of us for this first venture into indoor, in-person worship in months and months. It's hard to describe the energy that ricocheted around us that morning. Many of us were nervous - I certainly was. There was a certain hesitancy in the air. It was as if we were back after a long exile from one another -

tenuous, hopeful and - also - joyful. I remember I was caught by surprise by the tears that welled up in my eyes when I stepped up to this mic and said “Good morning church!” Something I had taken for granted for years. I had really come to enjoy our Zoom worship - and hybrid worship wasn’t yet in our wheelhouse - and I felt uncertainty about this return. Was it safe enough? Would anyone show up? How would it feel to be back in the pulpit, robed and masked? And in that one simple sentence, my angst vanished. “Good morning, church!” I might as well have said “Shout aloud and sing for joy! For great in your midst is the Holy One!” In that moment, I could imagine a “post-pandemic” world, could almost see it. I’m glad I didn’t know how long we still were - still are - from that reality. It would have tainted that wash of joy and relief and promise that I felt - that maybe you felt too. We need those glimpses of unadulterated hope - they keep us going when what looks like the summit up ahead turns out to be just another bend in the path. Those flashes of light remind us that the dawn will come. Even if it’s not right now or even right around the corner. They remind us that whether we are in darkness or in light, The Holy One is in our midst. They remind us that joy is possible.

When was the last time you were overcome with joy? One of my purest moments of joy is embedded in my memory, surrounded by light and love.

Surely the presence of the LORD was in that place. I am playing a game with my 9-month-old baby. It is a game that involves snuggles and surprises and lots and lots of baby laughter. I can still hear it as if it were happening right this moment - and it sounds like water bubbling up from the wells of salvation. When I am feeling lost or lonely or afraid, if I can still myself for a moment and settle into that memory, it never fails to fill me with joy as I draw water from that deep and holy well of Love.

What is it about a baby's laughter that captures us and pulls us - or at least me - into sparkling presence? I could be overtaken by my to-do list, chasing hard after some 'necessary' task, even filled with frustration - and the sound of a baby's laugh will drown out every other noise in my busy mind and pull me smack dab into joy. I wonder if Isaiah heard that sound when he was inspired to write the song of joy from this morning's scripture. Could that have been what he meant when he said, just a chapter earlier, "and a little child shall lead them"? Could the magic of a baby's laughter have been what Jesus was thinking of when he said that the Kin-dom of Heaven belongs to the little children? Could that have been the reason God chose to come to us as a little baby?

It often trips folks up that Joy Sunday is the third and not the fourth Sunday of Advent. It's easy to imagine Joy as the crescendo of the season

of light rather than part of the process. I read recently that “Joy” Sunday was one of the first themes assigned to the weeks of Advent - sometime in the Middle Ages. There’s wisdom in encouraging us to access our joy - because when we follow those moments of joy - moments Isaiah found in the midst of the fall of Jerusalem, moments that we have found in the midst of a pandemic, those illuminated moments that pull us so tightly into the presence of God that we cannot turn away - we find ourselves drawing closer and closer to the Shalom that Isaiah describes - the Shalom that God desires for us. We find ourselves more and more ready to lean into that radical trust in God that Isaiah has been preaching - a message that will be taken up centuries later by John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. As the glow of the Advent candles brightens, as the moments of joy bubble around us like water from a spring, it becomes easier and easier to imagine - no matter how dark the night has been - the Dawn of Redeeming Grace that is already starting to peek up over the horizon.