

Readings

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146

Luke 1:39-56

Preparing the Way 3

Since the beginning of last week I have been singing “Joy Shall Come Even in the Wilderness.” I’m not sure why this song has been stuck in my head, but perhaps it is because I have found myself caught up in the tiredness of the season. (And exhaustion for me always feels a bit like Wilderness).

And yet as I usually find when I pause I can recognize the spirit at work. After all was it me or rather the spirit working for, in and through me - who created this Advent Calendar of Spiritual Practice to ensure I/we are preparing ourselves appropriately for the season. We are to slow down down, focus and let go of the business but somehow I am still tired, and a little overwhelmed.

It’s not like I am in a difficult season of life, and yet like all of us I can get too busy and over-focused. I think that is why we need to read the messages of the prophets, and sit in the midst of faithful community so that we can remember God is with us. Even in this season of Christmas we need to be reminded every year of it’s meaning and purpose - Emmanuel - God with us. The true message of Christmas is much more comforting than what we have created it to be. The idea that today is a day of joy can be a hard message to hear, unless we recall that, that joy is Holy - God given - not out of our own creation. It’s a joy that is present even when it’s hard to glimpse. After all most of you will not be surprised to hear this is the hardest season for many. I likely don’t have to tell you how difficult Christmas is for those who have little finances, or family, for those who have recently gone through a break up or have lost loved ones and more. And yet today we hear a call for joy in each of our scriptures that offer us rich nourishing songs of transformation and hope.

Isaiah prophesies and reminds the people that we have a God who brings fullness and new life even to our desert, barren circumstances. And Mary had much to sing about being surprised and honored by the child growing within her. But this unexpected treasure did not come without complications and concerns. And yet she sang as she and Elizabeth recognized God with them. Mary came to recognize that God had chosen her to bear goodness and love - she discovered within herself that this birth had a purpose far beyond her understanding. Can you hear Mary singing as she carry’s on her daily duties, and discovers the gift she has been given, as she lives into her faith and belief that God will bring even the most complicated of circumstances to shine light and love in the world.

And what about Elizabeth?

In a brief reflection Joyce Rupp states “Elizabeth was a wise woman, not only because of her age, but because of the way she perceived life. Her wisdom is evident in her greeting to Mary. Elizabeth knew there was a deeper message for her when she felt the baby kicking in her womb. She was caught up in the wonder of Mary’s pregnancy. Elizabeth recognized the power of Mary’s visit and how faithful God was. It was a moment of awe and joy as she exclaimed how fully God was present with them.”¹

let me read for you again the advent reflection from Monday:

Mary and Elizabeth

Mary and Elizabeth
two strong women
whose wombs
carried two strong men

Mary and Elizabeth
two hospitable women
with wombs wide, full
of grace and conversion

Mary and Elizabeth
two loving women,
blessing one another
with the grace of affection,
strength of communion

Mary and Elizabeth
did they know the dance
within their wombs
might change a hurting heart,
transform a languished life

Mary and Elizabeth,
two holy women
wombs gestating goodness,
sources of nurturing grace
yeast for every inner birthing

¹ Rupp, Joyce “Inviting God In” pg. 33

- Joyce Rupp²

As you pause in this season and consider the coming of Jesus that is upon us have you discovered sources of nurturing grace within you? Has the pausing to recognize hope, peace and joy birthed something in you? Has the prophets message to prepare the way made you consider what it means to prepare for God in your life - or even what it might look like to welcome such Holiness? I have begun to hear from some of you that it has. That the opportunity to focus in spiritual practice for this season has changed many days - or at least offered moments of peace. I know it has for me. It is a practice I hope to continue in the years to come. Actively waiting and preparing the way for Christ seems like something we all should have been doing all along.

Interestingly enough I found an old advent calendar in my box of Christmas decorations and on this calendar - which has a picture of the nativity - each window I open doesn't have a chocolate - but a scripture to pause upon. It made me wonder when we lost that vision.

So as I was explaining to a friend of mine this week all the things we do in this season I asked her if she knew what advent was - and of course she said - oh like the calendar with the chocolates? Yes, yes I said - and then explained the purpose of the season she knew nothing about other than a month of daily chocolates. She reflected - well that is a much more meaningful purpose to the season. It makes a lot of sense she said (and she's buddhist). Prepare the Way for new life is the message we have sadly lost.

Rupp says "As Christmas draws near, it is easy to forget God's nearness as we rush around with many last-minute preparations. We need to slow down and catch (*Mary's vision and*) Elizabeth's wisdom. *Elizabeth* experienced a special moment and recognized it as an opportunity to sense God's nearness. She knew how much strength and comfort there was in that awareness. That's what led her to trust so strongly and to love so deeply."

As we continue to prepare the way of our souls this week I invite you to place yourself in the wisdom of these women, these God bearers. To chose to be aware of the holy presence in the midst of the clutter, and business, the sorrows and the joys. Perhaps we have the opportunity this week to come to the world as Elizabeth; as midwives assisting in the birth of light and love for all creation. Perhaps we are to proclaim joy and new life with Isaiah. Perhaps we are to be the God bearers - the ones who assist in birthing the good news. Perhaps we too are intricately woven into this story that reveals a God that gives hope for the future, peace for the anxious and the warring, joy for the sorrowing, and love for the lonely.

God is showing up once again in the most unexpected of ways through the most unanticipated people. Can you point to the experience of the presence of God even now? Can you offer God to those people and places around and within you that need to know joy and love, and an

² Rupp, Joyce Out of the Ordinary "Mary and Elizabeth" ave maria press Notre Dame, Indiana ©2000 pg. 30

unexpected God presence. Can you show them the character of The Holy, can you help birth the emmanuel story this day?

Listen to the joy of Isaiah and the wisdom of Elizabeth as you live into the song of Mary and be a God-bearer this day.

Closing Prayer

Holy wisdom, God of hope

Come birth new life within us

Holy mystery, God of peace

Come emmanuel - Come. Amen