

Squamish United Church
Rev. Karen Millard

December 11, 2011

Scripture Readings

Luke 1:39-55

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Joyful Witness

This is "rejoicing" Sunday, that is why we lit the candle of Joy. This third Sunday of Advent invites us into a new world. From the beginning of Advent we have been in the world of exiles and today we are in a world where the captives are freed, where the hungry are filled and where the rich are sent away empty. It's a world of reversal where God's kingdom of grace and love for the outcast and oppressed reigns.

It's a world that we gaze at from a distance and for the most part consider an impossible dream. From our point of view this kind of social order may not even be appealing. Rather we might find ourselves asking "What about us? What about the righteous?" But from God's point of view these signs of transformation are hope for all the world. In order to appreciate the strength of today's message from Isaiah, we must remember that he was speaking to people who were dispossessed, people in need of a message of hope, a promise of some kind of economic reversal.

Isaiah 61 reflects the confused situation of Israel after the return from exile in the late 6th century B.C. "Nevertheless, the prophet refuses to wallow in discouragement. Rather, he describes his prophetic calling as bringing "glad tidings to the lowly" and regards it as a source of great joy: "I rejoice heartily in the Lord, my God is the joy of my soul." In the Hebrew Bible there are many occasions for joy: marriage, the birth of children, good harvests, recovery from sickness and defeat of enemies. But the greatest and most basic source of joy is God's action on behalf of his people. To this the prophet is a joyful witness. And his joy has a social dimension not only for the poor and oppressed in Israel but for all peoples."¹

And then in the New Testament the opening line in Paul's text on this Sunday of joy is "Rejoice always." However, besides the theme of joy running through the

¹ Joyful Witnesses Harrington, Daniel

readings, there is another theme: witness. The Old Testament prophet, Mary and John the Baptist all bear joyful witness to what God has done and will do for God's people.

From Luke we heard Mary's Magnificat when Mary visits Elizabeth. And when she is greeted as "the mother of my Lord," Mary breaks into song, praising God for what God was doing through her. Harrington suggests "There is also a social dimension to Mary's joyful witness, since the birth of her child, the messiah, will bring fullness to the hungry and mercy to God's people. Like the prophet, Mary focuses her joyful witness on what God has done and will do for his people."²

This is the message of each of our texts. It's time for the world to change. Time for us to take part in the bringing about of God's kingdom for all creation not just for a select few. It a call to bring about a world where those who are oppressed today are rejoicing tomorrow. Today on this third Sunday of Advent we are being called to not look at those who are struggling from a distance but we are called to participate in turning this world upside down.

Today we must ask ourselves some real questions: "Are we willing to step forward? Or are we afraid to have our world turned upside down? Are we the poor who will hear the good news of reversal, or are we the ones responsible for their poverty? Are we the brokenhearted who will be healed, or have we broken their hearts? Are we the captives who will be freed, or are we the captors who have restrained them? On what side of the reversals do we find ourselves?"³

It is no accident that Christmas comes just a few days after the longest, darkest night and day of the year. Every ancient society had a festival at about this time of the year. The ancient Greeks and Romans placed lights in their windows at this time of the year to celebrate that the days were getting longer again. It is also in December that Judaism has its festival of lights called Hanukkah. It's a festival of bringing light into the dark places of our world in every form. And we are called to rejoice and pray without ceasing, never quenching the Spirit even when it might feel like the Spirit has hidden away from the dark and the cold. John calls us to testify to the light. Not just in ceremony but in action!

Advent was never meant to be a month of singing carols and celebrating. Advent in fact comes from the pagan origin of the feast honoring God "adventus." Advent

² IBID

³ Bergant Dianne. Sermon Fodder textweek.com

is a time to remember just how much the whole world needs Emmanuel - God with us.

Much like John we are called to be a “sign/witness” to God. “We are intermediaries or signs that are to point the world to Jesus, and through Jesus to the Father.”⁴ We ourselves are not the Christ we are to be the voices, ears, arms, legs and hearts that point others to Christ. Without such signs people may not know who this God is, they may not know grace and peace, hope, joy and love. Without us living the signs others may also miss God right in the midst of them. Without our living Emmanuel - God with us may go completely unnoticed.

Jerry Goeble wrote “In essence, we are not waiting for Jesus; we are waiting on Jesus. The very word “disciple” suggests that we are the wait staff in the King’s dining hall. Jesus himself describes us as such. This was the role of John, to wait upon Jesus.”⁵ So as we participate in knitting toques, and shawls or gathering clothes, turkeys and money for First United; or as we pack and deliver hampers for Community Christmas Care, and as we joy in the celebration of a wonderful community dinner last week let us remember that we are participating in joyful witness for the Holy One who lives amongst us.

Let us proclaim the coming of Jesus by living into the story of his life. Believing that Christ is alive among us. Our Christmas preparations are not for a coming event but rather for clarity of vision to recognize what is already here. We believe God is here with us and we are called to give the evidence in this Advent season. Emil Brunner wrote “The church exists by mission, as fire exists by burning.”⁶

Advent is a wake up call. A time to set the clocks of your heart to be a joyful witness to Emmanuel! Raise the chalice of your life and take in the joy the joy of being Awake!

Amen.

⁴ Stroffregen Sermon Fodder textweek.com

⁵ Goeble, Jerry Sermon Fodder texweek.com

⁶ Brunner IBID