

Committed to Joy

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Psalm 146:4-9

How many of you have ever seen cactus bloom in the desert? I'm not talking about the Christmas Cactus on your counter, but genuine desert cactus. Growing up in Arizona, I was not a huge fan of the dry, colorless landscape. But one of my favorite things was waiting for spring when the saguaro, prickly pear, and barrel cactus all started blooming. There is something magical about the brown landscape suddenly bursting into vibrancy. Isaiah talks about the desert blooming, and if you've never seen it then take my word for it, it's breathtaking.

Our Biblical authors did not write for those who were experiencing abundance. They wrote to encourage the forsaken to hope for and expect abundance. The promise of the Messiah, the message of the gospel, is for those living in desolation. Isaiah speaks of the weak, the fearful, the blind, deaf, and mute. The Psalmist speaks of the oppressed, the hungry, prisoners, those who are bowed down, foreigners, the parentless, and the partnerless. Only those who have experienced the bareness of the desert rejoice when the waiting and suffering ends. Only those who long for the promise of the Messiah, rejoice at Jesus' arrival. The gospel is for those who, like a dry desert, feel barren and forgotten. If we've ever known the grief of loss or the hopelessness of despair, then the good news of the gospel is for us.

Today is the midway point of the Advent season. It is Rose Sunday, in Greek it is called Gaudete, which means, "rejoice". If any of us are feeling looming pressure, rather than joyful anticipation at the next couple weeks, then this Sunday is for us. If any of us are feeling grief renewed by the smells, sounds, and traditions of the season, then this Sunday is for us. If any of us are sick, suffering, hiding pain behind a smile, and desperate for relief,

then this Sunday is for us. We are in good company this morning and the message of today's readings is for us.

This morning, we hear Isaiah speaking to God's people before their land was taken in battle and their families were driven into exile. They were living in fear and deprivation, of wartime conflict. Isaiah was offering them the promise of God's love and the hope of future restoration that would carry them through their country's looming destruction. They would experience the judgment their disobedience had incurred, but God would be with them, and God's love would carry them into restoration. Then the psalmist writes to those who have returned from exile, back to their homeland, rebuilding the temple and reclaiming their inheritance. The land to which they returned had been destroyed by war, but the promises of God had carried them through some of the worst days of Israel's history. These authors write powerfully about the transformational reality of God's care for those who suffer. Trusting that, clinging to that, has always been the means through which God's people have experienced the sustaining strength of joy. One day, as Isaiah says, "the burning sands will become a pool and the thirsty ground, springs of water". Claiming this, even while waiting, is often the means by which the spiritual reality of it becomes true for us. Looking to God and remaining open prepares us to receive. Sometimes, our greatest blessings in this life arrive as surprisingly as blossoms in the desert.

This morning, we also hear Jesus speaking of John the Baptist. John had spent his entire life in preparation for the Messiah. At his birth he was consecrated as a Nazarite, which meant he couldn't cut his hair, have any contact with the dead, or drink any wine, ever. He was set apart as an infant for the sole purpose of preparing the way for Jesus' ministry. When our text refers to him today, he is in prison. Almost immediately after he baptized Jesus, inaugurating the messiah's ministry, John was taken into captivity. How does a man who lived without social constraints, wild and free, fervently preaching and drawing large crowds, handle it when he is suddenly taken as a prisoner, his voice silenced, his ministry ended?

John didn't know what was happening beyond the walls of his cage. He had faith in the ministry he had performed, but faith always holds a measure of uncertainty. He was desperate for some assurance. He hoped for the fulfillment of his ministry, but how does a person who has lived for a single purpose feel when that purpose ends? He did what he was called to do. The messiah was inaugurated through him. And his ministry was complete. Soon after this, Herod would have him killed. When we remember John's work, we bless him. But I feel confident that there were moments in prison when he was not feeling very blessed. Our Psalmist says that God sets the prisoner free. John lived spiritually in freedom, but in his lifetime, his body was not ultimately set free. Jesus calls him the greatest man ever born, but in this life, being great does not always feel great.

All of us can relate, on some level, with these stories. We know what it is like when the path ahead of us suddenly changes. We have known the grief of loss. We are here because we know that the gospel is good news. We have experienced joy, even in pain, and we trust that we will know it again even when it feels far from us.

Joy is an amazing thing. Unlike happiness that comes and goes based on the immediate and transitory events of life, joy is a deeper, more resilient, contentment that roots us to our purpose in this life. Happiness depends on our circumstances, whereas joy is a choice to remain open to the presence of God, even amid suffering. Joy is a defiant confidence in God that coexists with loss, exhaustion, fear, and pain. It doesn't replace those emotions, it accompanies them. It is an expression of faith, a response to the reign of God over and above the mire of our immediate moment. We all want to feel happy, but happiness is fleeting. Joy can exist in the hospital bed. It can remain during the long days waiting for test results. It can stay rooted even when everything else feels like it's been stripped away. Joy is a grace we receive and a posture we practice. We can cultivate joy. Joy is inextricably linked to our faith. It recognizes life beyond our current moment. Cultivating joy is the spiritual practice of believing God. James tells his readers to be patient like farmers

waiting for crops. Farmers till the soil and plant the seeds in faith. They look to the future. They learn patience through going through this process every year. They remind themselves to remain open to the miracle of regeneration, to believe and hope for what they cannot yet see.

James knows it is not easy to be patient. He says to, “strengthen your hearts”. This means to make firm by resolution. Cultivating joy requires a measure of unshakable determination. There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says, “all things are difficult before they become easy”. If we want joy to become natural, we must practice. If we remind ourselves to believe God, to look for God in the desert, even in our most difficult situations, we will find our joy renewed and strengthened. To rejoice means to express joy. Choosing to continually look to God with thankful expectation, rather than ruminating on our current pain, will lead our hearts and the hearts of others into the experience of joy. In advent and in every season, the coming of the Lord is nearer than we imagine. Remaining open to God and looking for confirmation of God’s presence will bring the joy that Isaiah and the psalmist affirm.

John was a prophet who lived his whole life with the expectation of the messiah’s arrival. His greatest wish was the fulfilment of his lifelong hope. He didn’t have the freedom to see it for himself. Instead, he sent his friends to verify it for him. Some folks think John’s question points to a lack of faith. I think the question proves his faith. He stayed open to believe. He didn’t give up. He strengthened his heart to ask the question. And he trusted his friends to bring him the answers he needed. Sometimes our greatest act of faith is trusting others and leaning on their stories to strengthen our hearts. According to Isaiah, the determination of God’s people to walk towards God, even through the desert, will itself push back sorrow and sighing, and make it possible for us to sing and embrace our promised joy.

May we be a people who walk through the desert, telling ourselves and one another the words of Isaiah, “be strong, do not fear!” as we determinedly embrace the promise of everlasting joy.