

“Redemptive Joy”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Advent III – December 17, 2017

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

One of the hardest things over the last three months for me to experience or “catch” is joy. It’s like a firefly at night: you see it light up and you can almost grab it, but then it goes dark and disappears from your grasp. As we have walked this journey of my dad’s illness since September, joy has been less prevalent and more sporadic than any other time in my life. I go out in public and see others laughing and smiling, and I can’t help but be envious of their joy – wishing I could know that feeling with greater frequency, or feel it as I have felt it in the past.

That doesn’t mean that joy doesn’t make an appearance anymore, though. There are those moments of happiness that bring light amid the heavy times. Those joy-filled moments are like sitting at home with my family, and for a moment getting lost in the mundane of watching TV and laughing at something silly we see. It can be like hearing my dad crack a joke with the physical therapist, and a smile or chuckle is shared by the three of us. It can be reminiscing about joy-filled moments in the past, and there’s almost a warmth that envelopes you – even for just a moment – and I feel like I’ve caught that elusive firefly in the mason jar.

And yet, when we are experiencing crises or suffering or long-stretches of challenge, joy is not something we see or feel or experience as easily or readily. It’s hard to feel joyful when you don’t know where your next paycheck is going to come from. It’s hard to feel joyful when you are still left with unanswered questions about your loved one’s health. It’s hard to feel joyful when you’re trying to juggle school and applying to college and extracurricular activities and everyone else’s expectations of you. It’s hard to feel joyful when you’re afraid and anxious – and you don’t know why.

We each – at some point in our lives – know what it feels like to be weighed down, to be burdened, to being held captive by forces which seem beyond our control. It may be today, this morning, this moment – or it may not be, and instead was a time in your past. But we all know how it feels to be far from joy, and it feels like the waiting is intolerable and never-ending.

Waiting is inherent in this season of Advent. It would not be Advent without having to wait. But the waiting is not a fruitless exercise. It has a purpose, even if we can’t always understand it. That purpose is to know and experience God’s joy – redemptive joy – which releases us from our captivity to darkness and sin, and leads us into hope and promise, even when it seems that such hope is unattainable.

Our text today is from the prophet Isaiah. But one thing to keep in mind is that the book of Isaiah can more readily be understood as three different books or sections. The first two sections, up to chapter 55, reflect the prophet first

prophesying to his people of the exile to come, and then to them while they are in exile in Babylon. The third section, from which our text comes today, is spoken to the Israelites after they have returned from exile, but are still living under foreign rule. Their perceived glorious return from exile has not taken place, and they are suffering from economic oppression and harsh living conditions (HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV, introductory notes, 1012-1013). In other words, what they had hoped would be a great homecoming has turned into a sour dose of hard reality.

It is to this context that the prophet speaks. And what the prophet speaks is of redemption for his oppressed people. Isaiah uses words of change to bring forth God's message to his chosen people. "Bind up the brokenhearted . . . release to the prisoners . . . liberty to the captives . . . comfort all who mourn . . . build up the ancient ruins . . . raise up the former devastations . . . repair the ruined cities" (61:1-4). The prophet opens his proclamation by giving the people hope that their current condition will not be permanent. So, he names the situations they are in, in essence acknowledging on behalf of God that they are suffering. But also in naming them, he promises that their suffering will change, will be redeemed, into a new, more promising life.

In the second half of this passage, the prophet assures his listeners that God is aware of who is causing them suffering, and that God's people will be restored as a light to the world. "For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; and all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed" (61:8-9). In other words, Isaiah tells the people that their redemption by God shall be a sign to the world that God's kingdom is not something far in the future, but is happening in the here and now.

Scott Bader-Saye writes: *Theologically, these verses from Isaiah center around the themes of salvation and mission. Whenever we speak of salvation (which is from the same root as the word "save"), we need to ask the question, what are we being saved from? from God's punishment? from the devil? from our own sins? from death? In some ways each of these answers has been a part of the Christian theological tradition, but in different times and places certain ones have been emphasized. For many Christians today salvation means "getting into heaven," which is a way of saying that human beings are saved from God's punishment (by being in heaven and not hell), from death (by being alive and not dead), and from sin and the devil (neither of which has power in heaven). This way of thinking about salvation leads to an understanding of "mission" as the work of getting as many people as possible into heaven . . . In contrast to this, Isaiah challenges readers to name salvation as a quality of life here and now that reflects God's desires for human community.*

What is salvation in Isaiah 61? It is good news, healing, liberty, release, and comfort. It is "the year of the Lord's favor," a reference to the jubilee year . . . Salvation is imaged as both a restored city (61:4) and as an abundant garden (61:11). And this recognition by the other nations reaffirms that Isaiah's vision is

not a promise of pie in the sky. God's deliverance is real, tangible, and this-worldly. It can be seen by others . . .

(And we today) are invited to participate in this salvific living, even in the midst of a world not yet fully redeemed. Mission happens today when we turn our attention to those who are named as the recipients of the good news: the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mournful, the faint of spirit. In order to participate in God's mission of restoration, the people of God are sent first to those who most need to hear that God will provide for them and will redeem their losses. Mission is not primarily something that goes out from God's people - by sending money or sending missionaries - but something that defines God's people, as existing for the sake of the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and mournful.

Mission also happens when the nations of the world notice that the people of God live differently, that "they are a people whom the Lord has blessed" (61:9). Twice we are told that the nations will notice the blessing of Israel (61:9,11) . . . A restored Israel, living as a jubilee community, will stand as a sign of God's blessing to the nations around it, a kind of sacramental enacting of the salvation toward which it points. To be missional is to live as a people of good news, liberation, justice, and comfort in such a way that the world may take notice and be drawn to the ways of God (Scott Bader-Saye, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 50-54).

There's another place that this passage from Isaiah is heard in the biblical witness. It is in the New Testament, from the Gospel of Luke, and it directly reminds us of who our redemptive joy is embodied in.

"When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day . . . He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:16-21).

In our season of waiting in Advent, we both receive and give redemptive joy when we comfort the brokenhearted and those who mourn. We both receive and give redemptive joy when we not only give of our money to those who are poor, but also sit, listen, and lift up those who are lowly and struggling amid life's crushing load. We both receive and give redemptive joy when we acknowledge our own brokenness and need for healing, and provide a space for people to do the same. Redemptive joy is not superficial or sentimental; it is deep, real, and transforms us as people of God into the agents of joy to a hurting, broken world.

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God." Let us all prepare anew for the redemptive joy God is sending in Emmanuel, God with Us, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.