

Advent 3 December 11, 2016 Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Advent 3: When There's No Joy in Mudville

I have a confession to make. I lit the joy candle on my Advent wreath a day early. I could not wait because I'd been thinking and thinking and thinking about joy - and coming up empty. Which is a problem because we're fast approaching the season of Christmas joy, preparing for the birth of Jesus, who would later tell his disciples – and through them us - “These things I've said to you: that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.”

But I'm feeling more like John the Baptist these days, when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or do we to look for another?" That's quite a change, isn't it from last week's reading. Last week John was full of confidence, preaching with power about the one to come, whose sandals he was unworthy to even untie. But now, years later, he's sitting alone in a dark and dank cell, questioning his earlier confidence and perhaps his very mission and identity, as he sends word to ask Jesus a poignant, even heartbreaking question: are you really the one or should we look elsewhere?

The movement from last week's reading to this one is a jump from a sure and certain confidence to doubt; from fiery conviction to uncertainty and despair. Anticipation to disappointment. Hope to desperation. We've all been there, right? Charging ahead with dreams and plans, moving forward with optimism about the future, only to be stopped in our tracks: maybe by illness, or injury, loss of employment, the death of a loved one, or the loss of a relationship, or any of a thousand other things that cause us suddenly to stumble and lose our confidence. And when our heartache, uncertainty, despair, disappointment, and desperation isn't only about ourselves, but our entire nation – the pain is overwhelming. As it was for John, I imagine.

As it was for the exiles in Babylon, too - the ones Isaiah was writing to in our first reading, hundreds of years before John. They must have wondered, “Aren't we God's own chosen people? How could it have come to this, to be so humiliated, to have our homeland taken away from us? Could the words from Psalm 137 express their heartache any more poignantly: By the rivers of Babylon,

there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

That kind of despair isn't unique to ancient Israelis. Exile is a condition in which many people find themselves: refugees and displaced people from Syria and Somalia; unaccompanied children from Central America; political exiles such as the Dalai Lama. But we don't have to go far to find others in exile. The holidays can be an especially difficult time for LGBTQ people who have been banished from their families. This year I'm mindful of those estranged from family and/or community because of the election. In a

way, the whole country has been thrown into exile. Is this our home?

We don't recognize it anymore. So how can *we* sing God's song in a foreign land? As Orion put in the email introduction to *Keeping in Touch*, "There is no joy in Mudville."

So there I was with my Advent wreath candles burning down: candles for hope, for peace, and for joy. And I realized that this has been one of the most spiritually challenging Advents that I've experienced. In the aftermath of the election, I don't know how it's been for you, but I've had to go a lot deeper into these words. Spiritual platitudes won't do – not for me, and I'm certainly not going to spout them to you.

But just as hope is not the same as optimism and peace is more than absence of conflict, joy is more than fleeting happiness. Remember the old camp song: I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy. Down in my heart, Down in my heart, Down in my heart?

It's not just a dumb old camp song. Sometimes those old chestnuts get at a profound truth. Down in your heart is where you find the hope, peace and joy that passes all understanding. Now getting down into the heart may not be so simple. We let our hearts get pretty well defended, especially – let's just admit it - against God. Because if we really allowed ourselves to feel the presence of Divine Spirit within us, well, it could shake our world. We might be inspired to do something that would totally mess up our vision of the way life is supposed to be. And I'm not going to tell you that couldn't happen. But I am going to tell you that by opening our hearts to Divine Spirit, we also open ourselves to deep joy.

And that must have been what Isaiah experienced. What else could have caused him to proclaim to the people who dwelled in deep darkness, the exiles in Babylon:

Let the desert and the wilderness exult! Let them rejoice and bloom like the crocus!

Let it blossom profusely, Let it rejoice and sing for joy!

Those whom God ransomed will return.

They will enter Zion with shouting for joy, with everlasting joy on their faces.

Joy and gladness will go with them; sorrow and lament will flee away.

Maybe some of those who heard Isaiah's words thought he'd gone off the deep end. There was no rational reason to think that any such thing would happen. But there it was – a song of joy in the midst of darkness.

And that's what we're called to do in Advent. Advent reminds us that, against all evidence to the contrary, another world is possible. New life can emerge from the ruins. In the patient partnership between divine and human, God keeps on creating and calls us to be innovative as well. We owe it to ourselves and the world to find this place of joy down in our hearts. And maybe the quote of the week in *KIT* gives us a clue: "It is so much easier

to sing about joy than to talk about it.”

Now I have to tell you that it was right here, at this point in the sermon that I opened the email from Orion with the bulletin attached. I wanted to see what he'd picked for us to sing after the sermon. I laughed out loud: “Comfort, O Comfort, My People.”

Let me explain. I met with my spiritual director on Friday and we spent most of the time discussing the aftermath of the election and how we need to find a balance between our righteous anger at what's happened and our compassion for people who are on the other side of the political divide; between being prophetic/telling it like it is and finding some common ground where reconciliation might happen. What we came to was a recognition that we have to accept that probably for a long time we're going to be in an uncomfortable place. I jokingly said we might not be able to sing “Comfort, O Comfort, My People” this year. But I see now that I was wrong. It's exactly what we need to sing. The words of comfort to people living in exile are words of comfort for us. And what happens when we sing – especially when we sing together - is that we go down into our hearts where we can find that deep joy.

No, it doesn't make logical sense. But logical sense isn't always what is called for. I saw one of those time-waster quizzes on a friend's Facebook page. It would tell you if you're more right brain or left-brain. My friend scored 50/50: evenly divided between analytic, rational, objective left-brain and imagination, creative, music right brain. Mine, however, came out 70/30 on the analytic, rational, objective side. My comment was, “Sigh I've really been trying to engage that creative side more.” My friend wrote back, “I think your analytical side is very creative.” My response was, “I'll have to think about that.”

Now I realize that my answer should have been “I'll have to sing about that.” Or dance. As Sufi teacher Pir Vilayet Khan asked “Why aren't you dancing with joy at this very moment? It's the only relevant spiritual question.”

OK. I know. Not all of us are singers or dancers. But the message of both quotes is to do something to engage that creative right brain: sing, dance, make art, read a poem, write a song, create a new recipe, play silly games that make absolutely no sense. Laugh. I wish we had Dolores White here with us to do laughing yoga.

Will this take away the troubles of the world? No. But it will create joy deep down in your heart where the Holy Presence resides in you. And from that holy heart of it, the world will change. In the patient partnership between divine and human, God will keep on creating and will keep on calling us to be innovative as well.

But for now, it's so much easier to sing about joy than to talk about it. And so that's just what we'll do. “Comfort, O Comfort, My People.”

Amen

Isaiah 35:1-10

Exiles will return; the fearful will be comforted, the oppressed uplifted; all creation will share in God's glory. The Advent readings present a vision of impossibilities – the kingdom of God among us, a new orientation for all whose lives have been broken by political or personal trauma. Yet, are these impossibilities? Many things deemed so have come to pass through patient attending to God's vision for history. Of course, many things still seem beyond our grasp – and indeed appear to be moving further from our grasp – yet still lure us toward personal and corporate transformation. History is ambiguous. However, we can live with hope as God's partners in healing the world.

It is written . . .

Let the desert and the wilderness exult!
Let them rejoice and bloom like the crocus!
Let it blossom profusely,
Let it rejoice and sing for joy!
The glory of Lebanon is bestowed on it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon.
They will see the glory of YHWH,
the splendor of our God.

Strengthen all weary hands.
Steady all trembling knees.
Say to all those of a fearful heart:
"Take courage! Don't be afraid!
Look, YHWH is coming, vindication is coming,
the recompense of God –
God is coming to save you! "

Then the eyes of those who are blind will be opened,
the ears of those who cannot hear will be unsealed.
Those who cannot walk will leap like deer,
and the tongues of those who cannot speak will sing for joy.
Waters will break forth in the wilderness,
and there will be streams in the desert.
The scorched earth will become a lake,
the parched land, springs of water.
The lairs where jackals used to dwell
will become thickets of reeds and rushes.

And through it will run a highway,
a road called the Holy Way.
The unclean may not travel by it,
but it will be for God's people alone;
and no traveler - not even fools - will go astray.

No lions will be there,
nor will any fierce beast roam about it.
But the redeemed will walk there -
for those whom God ransomed will return.
They will enter Zion with shouting for joy, with everlasting joy on their faces.
Joy and gladness will go with them; sorrow and lament will flee away.

James 5:7-10

The Letter of James counsels patience. Yet, in light of the whole message of James, patience does not imply passivity. James is an epistle of ethical activism and care for the downtrodden. Faith without works is worthless. We must be patient with the movements of God's moral arc of history; we must not give up hope nor should we polarize in times of challenge. God's nearness challenges us to justice-seeking, grounded in care for those whose power we confront. Pray for the president-elect and president even when you may be inclined to protest their policies. They too are God's children, and as they seek to gain the world, their souls may be in jeopardy.

It is written . . .

Be patient, beloved, until the appearance of Christ. See how the farmer awaits the precious yield of the soil, looking forward to it patiently while the soil receives the winter and spring rains. You, too, must be patient. Steady your hearts, because the coming of Christ is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, my beloved, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! To learn how to persevere patiently under hardship, take as your models the prophets who spoke in the name of the Most High.

Matthew 11:2-11

Jesus' response to John the Baptizer echoes the hopeful vision of Isaiah 35. The Messiah is known by the appearance of good news at every level of life. Good news is lived as well as spoken. Bodies are healed, outcasts welcomed, impoverished given hope. Jesus' gospel is holistic and life-changing, and gives preferential care for those at the fringes of life.

It is written . . .

While John was in prison, he heard about the works the Messiah was performing, and sent

a message by way of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or do we to look for another?"

In reply, Jesus said to them, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see:

Those who are blind recover their sight;

those who cannot walk are able to walk;

those with leprosy are cured;

those who are deaf hear;

the dead are raised to life;

and the *anawim* – the “have-nots” - have the good news preached to them.

Blessed is the one who finds no stumbling block in me."

As the messengers set off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swaying in the wind? Tell me, what did you go out to see? Someone luxuriously dressed? No, those who dress luxuriously are to be found in royal palaces. So what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, a prophet - and more than a prophet! It is about John that scripture says, 'I send my messenger ahead of you to prepare your way before you.' The truth is, history has not known a person born of woman who is greater than John the Baptizer. Yet the least born into the kin-dom of heaven is greater than he.