

SERMON: “Receive/Give the Gift of Advent Joy.”

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sun., December 11, 2011, St. James Presbyterian Church

There's no tougher job in the Bible that I can think of other than the one that God gives to John the Baptist. Oh, sure, other prophets suffered – especially the later ones – but, in my mind, John the Baptist had it rough. Why? Well, the Old Testament prophets had been predicting for hundreds of years – about 700 years – that one day God would fulfill His promises to be-with us, to interrupt human history and wrap Himself in human flesh – to become incarnated as one of us – and that He would restore the world to the way it should be. The only problem: as time passed, nothing happened – nothing. So when God tells John that he had the job of announcing the imminent arrival of the Messiah to the world I'm sure he wasn't too excited about the assignment – not because he didn't believe God, or that the promised messiah was on His way, or that he had given up on God's promises ever coming true; it's just that he knew that this would be a tough sell because the People of Israel had given up.

You see the People of Israel had long grown dubious and cynical about even the existence of God – the longer they waited, suffered, endured, the more they began to doubt God to the point where if anyone tried to tell them that the Good News of God's long awaited Messiah was coming true, they'd scoff and dismiss the news by saying “yeah, right!” as they ran them out of town. This is why John's job was so tough: and, it's why proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel is just as hard to do today. In many ways – as we've discussed already this Advent – we are like the ancient People of Israel: we're pessimistic about the veracity of God's promises – or even the very Gospel we claim to believe – and wonder whether we're just fooling ourselves. Like people who have waited too long for release – for relief – we've become hardened and have grown weary: we have drifted from faith to despair as we wonder as the People of Israel did, “*How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?*” (Psalm 89:46)

And that's how long it had felt for the People of Israel; forever. It had been 700 years since God had made His promise to their ancestors after they had suffered defeat in battle and endured exile, when they were broken and dispirited and diminished politically, militarily, when even the hope of restoration seemed futile. Crushed and conquered there was little enthusiasm amongst the People in rebuilding things to the ‘*way they were*’ – things both physical (such as the Temple) and spiritual (such as their relationship with God). Yet, as we heard in the Isaiah reading, God sent Isaiah to promise “*an everlasting covenant*” to them that they – who were now powerless and defeated – would once again become the object of God's extravagant and unconditional love; that God would one day come to be-with them and that they would be beloved and blessed by God. (Isaiah 61:9) But that was a long time ago: since then the People had all but abandoned their hope in God's favour, in enjoying God's blessings that Isaiah proclaims would come – a world filled with righteousness, with justice, and with joy. All of that was a long time ago; but as we learned last week God's time isn't ours.

By the time of the Luke reading the People – if they even thought about it – might be forgiven for wondering, where's the righteousness, the justice – where's the joy? As a people of faith they remembered the promise of the Psalm: *“Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy.”* (Psalm 126:6). And, as an Easter people, we know that God alone has the power to turn our sorrow into joy – our pain into rejoicing, our despair into hope. But all of this hadn't happened yet, and for a teenage girl in Nazareth, God was all but a distant memory. And this is where we need to pay attention: even when God seems absent God is at work in our lives. The story of our salvation – the Bible – tells us/reveals that despite appearances, God is with us. The lesson to be learned from the past is that when we don't do what God wants us to do – then each step we take gets harder as we get away further from God and where we want to be. (Isaiah 53:6) But the Bible also tells us that God is at work in every human endeavour that strives for peace and wholeness, even if that peace is partial and that wholeness only glimpsed and that when we align ourselves – when we choose to go the way God wants us to go – that our joy aligns with the joy experienced in heaven; and that God Himself rejoices. (Luke 15) But, let's get back to Mary.

Surprised – if not frightened – by the angel's sudden appearance, Mary is slow to grasp the full impact of his message: that her being pregnant is the definitive sign of God's coming into the world in a new and definitive way in the form of Jesus, Isaiah's Spirit-filled and anointed servant of the Lord. But then Mary responds to what God has asked of her by doing what a person who has been waiting for a long time for something to be happy about would do; she sings a song of praise to God for all that God has done – done and is doing through her for her and His people. In the first line of her song – known as the Magnificat, which is Latin for “magnify” – Mary “magnifies” – she tells how great God is – with her soul and that her spirit “rejoices” in God because He has blessed her with joy in knowing that, at last, God's promises of restoration, healing and compassion for all who suffer are coming to fruition: that through her God will usher forth His promised servant/Messiah to right an unjust world. And when Jesus, the One whose birth we proclaim every Advent season, began his ministry, He went to the synagogue and took out the scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and read the same hope-filled words of promise. Friends, in Jesus, the promises of God were about to be fulfilled – the long awaited promises of restoration, justice, healing and hope were about to come into being – and like Mary, having received the gift of Advent joy, we are called to give it/proclaim it to all we meet: Christ is coming: this is something for us to be joyful about.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to love God by serving other this Christmas. Amen