

3 Advent, Yr. A
December 11, 2016

St. Luke's

Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

This third Sunday of Advent is named Gaudete Sunday, from the Latin which means, "to rejoice." Hence the pink candle rather than another purple one. And the reading from Isaiah is certainly one that emphasizes joy – it's an exuberant, joyful reading, with all of creation rejoicing – the desert blooming, waters breaking forth in the arid wilderness and a highway opening up for God's people to find their way home. It's about joy, about sorrow that's been overcome. As the last line says, there will be everlasting joy...and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. And, I suppose, the reading from James is joyful, too, because he's clear that the Lord is indeed coming – we may have to be patient, though, in the same way that a farmer, once having planted the field and done what he could for his crop, simply must wait, depending on factors beyond his control. As someone once said, going out to the field and pulling on the shoots coming up doesn't help at all.

But the reading from Matthew is different. It's about waiting, too, but not about waiting joyfully. And that's not surprising because John is waiting from prison and he's waiting for Jesus to pick up the mantle that was taken out of John's hands when he was thrown into prison by Herod Antipas. A word about the history and context here. First of all, to be arrested by Herod is the first step toward being eliminated; it is just a matter of time. You may remember that John came and challenged Herod on the legitimacy of his marriage to Herodias who was Herod's brother's wife and Herod's own niece. Scholars think that Herod, always anxious, paranoid really, about establishing his own good credentials as a Jew, married her to bolster those credentials. Herod was Jewish, but his mother was a Samaritan Arab and, like his father before him, he always felt caught between the Romans and the Jews and always distrusted his subjects. So the marriage was important to him and John's challenge was most unwelcome. So John is in prison and, knowing that his death and the end of his ministry are imminent, his thoughts turn to Jesus and what he's about. John's questions now are not the kind of questions we might pose out of mere intellectual curiosity – these are real, existential questions.

You'll remember from earlier stories about John and Jesus that it was pretty clear that John knew who Jesus was. There was the moment when Mary and Elizabeth, John's mother, met during their pregnancies and Elizabeth said that the infant in her womb recognized Mary's child and leapt for joy. And then there was Jesus' baptism by John in which John saw the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus and he recognized him as the one sent by God. Scholars are fairly certain that Jesus became one of John's disciples, but, at a certain point, he struck off on his own. And, when we look at Jesus' ministry, and compare it to John's, we can see a great difference. And that must have been what John was musing on when he was in Herod's jail. When he thinks it over, he realizes that while he's been in the desert eating locusts and honey, Jesus has been changing water into wine at Cana. While John's been condemning sinners and calling them broods of vipers, Jesus has been eating with them. While John is talking about destruction and damnation, about the ax being laid to the root of the tree, Jesus instead is talking about God's love and pointing out the tender green shoots of the Kingdom sprouting here and there, and protecting them.

John is probably not only puzzled by Jesus, but deeply disappointed by him. So he sends some of his disciples to ask that all-important question. ARE YOU THE ONE WHO IS TO COME, OR ARE WE TO WAIT FOR ANOTHER? The question could be stated another way – DID I MAKE A HUGE MISTAKE? HAVE MY LIFE AND MY WORK ALL BEEN IN VAIN? John is suffering from doubt and who can blame him? He and Jesus both had been preaching that the Kingdom was at hand. And that should have meant that things were set right, the wicked were punished, the just rewarded. Instead of that, Herod and the Romans and the

High Priest were still thriving and John was about to die. Had he been wrong or had Jesus dropped the ball?

You'll recognize the words in which Jesus responds to John as coming from Isaiah – go back and tell John what you see, the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor have the good news preached to them. We heard it this morning. But there's another passage in Isaiah, one that John would have found more palatable. It's in chapter 64 and it's the one about God coming with vengeance, coming so as to make the mountains quake and the nations tremble. This was more to John's way of thinking. And because that's what he expected, he was having a hard time seeing what Jesus was doing. John wanted a coming of God that was like a tidal wave, sweeping all evil away before it, or like a firestorm, destroying everything in its path.

(Remember the cartoon I mentioned a couple of weeks ago in which a guy is ordering a hot dog from a stand on the street and he looks up and sees a meteor heading for earth, so he adds, "I guess I WILL have fries with that!" That might be more like what John was expecting.)

So – expectations. What do we think of when we think of the arrival of the Kingdom? Because John was expecting something completely different, he didn't recognize it when he saw it. But that's not unusual, is it? I read something by Philip Yancey who is himself an evangelical. And, talking to other evangelicals, he cautioned them about their expectations and what happens when they're disappointed. He pointed to a book about a number of people in China who were gathered together by the Japanese occupiers and put into a concentration camp. One of them later wrote a book about the experience and he said that the evangelicals among them did not fare well – they complained about their circumstances, gossiped about the others and hoarded rather than shared their parcels from the West. According to the book, the prisoners who did best were a group of Trappists. Their superiors had lifted the rule of silence, they had variety in food, they could talk and laugh and swap jokes and they had the company of women – they thought the whole thing was like a holiday retreat. Expectations make all the difference.

The second thing to look at is how the kingdom will come. John (and some of us at least some of the time) wanted something big and dramatic. Something that would leave no doubt as to who were the good guys and who the bad. But Jesus' method was what someone has called the "drip" method. When we were in Israel, we more than once saw things growing in terrifically arid locations because they were being irrigated by a "drip" method. Hoses among the plants dripped water slowly; one drop at a time, directly at the base of the plant, so no water would be wasted through evaporation. The greenery in unlikely places was a tribute to the effectiveness of the method.

But that method, the slow, tend the roots method, requires a lot of patience. And that's hard for us to do. Even if we don't fall into the "fireball" category, we're still used to getting things done; we prefer being seen as actors, as movers and shakers. I remember traveling on SW airlines. I've you've flown with them you know there are no seat assignments, so there's a big crush at the gate to get to the front of the line. One of their attendants, just before the plane began to load, made an announcement in which he counseled patience and reminded people that the back of the plane and the front of the plane arrived at the same time, so seating didn't really matter. Patience!

Us as Advent people. Questions for us: what do we long for? What are our expectations when we think of the coming Kingdom? What do we see/look for. Jesus told John's disciples to go back and tell John what you have SEEN. What do we see? Those are those tender shoots of the kingdom breaking through that we need to become aware of, articulate, celebrate, nourish.

We're living in a time of anxiety – less concentrated than the anxiety that John was experiencing, but anxiety nevertheless – and we have our own questions. Maybe not the same one John asked: are you the one? But maybe one that is more about how we are to live in these times. What does a Kingdom life look like? These scriptures show us the answers. Kingdom living is about bringing light and joy and freedom to everything we touch. Let me close with a couple of examples that happened just this week. First of all, you may know that Pat Diemer died

on Friday. Pat and Dick, who died earlier this year, lived lives characterized by faithfulness and generosity, in their interactions with their family, their church, their friends and around the world. And then, when I was leaving Pat's bedside on Friday, I ran into Sue Gunderson who is the pastor at the Lutheran church in Baileys Harbor. She has a connection with Madagascar that she made while she was in seminary and she's planning to lead a mission trip there. One of the people going with her is a nurse and had planned to work in the emergency room of the town they would be visiting. That's great, they were told, but, although we have the building, we have no equipment, including no beds and, therefore, no patients. And then she found out that Scandia had 50 hospital beds that they would donate and a dentist who had a couple of dentist's chairs and a couple of Rotary Clubs who would pay for the shipping....the kingdom breaking in, wouldn't you agree?

One quick, final story. I was at a local restaurant and the owner who once or twice over the summer had come over and said that, when we both had a minute, she wanted to hear my story. Well, we had that moment on Friday. She talked about the restaurant in terms of providing healthy food and a warm welcome and a place where the community could gather, including groups that her kids belong to – Christian hospitality, in other words.

So, choices are all around us. We can choose to walk on that highway Isaiah calls the Holy Way – we can take care that we're going in the right direction. We can live kingdom lives – sometimes that may mean paying attention to, and pulling out weeds, but perhaps most often that will mean celebrating and nurturing those kingdom shoots. Amen.