

#3 16-17

Luke 1:46-55

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

Expecting Joy

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

For many traditions the four Sundays of Advent each carry a theme. Today's is Gaudete Sunday, meaning, rejoice. The scriptures for this day are designed to reiterate to Christians the importance of joy in the midst of our lives, regardless of our situation, because joy is the right response to Christ's birth. We are being asked on this Sunday in Advent to focus on the joy that Christ brings us. Now, this can be a challenge to many. There are plenty of reasons everyone can find, to complain about something, some real, some imagined, some grave, some small. But there is always the potential to spend our thought on something that is not joyous. And the pressure to be happy all the time is great in this culture.

In his 2014 Gaudete Sunday homily, Pope Francis said that Gaudete Sunday is known as the "Sunday of joy," and that instead of fretting about "all they still haven't" done to prepare for Christmas, people should "think of all the good things life has given you."

There is a difference between joy and happiness. According to Wikipedia: "Theologian Henri Nouwen described the difference between joy and happiness. While happiness is dependent on external conditions, joy is 'the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing -- sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death -- can take that love away.' Thus joy can be present even in the midst of sadness." THIS is the joy of Advent! This is the message of these ancient texts from Isaiah! We are being reminded that from the beginning of the awareness from the first nomad Israelite - there is always this promise from God for JOY! We are to expect it!

Along with these ancient words, I am reminded also of Maya Angelo, from her book, "*Letter to My Daughter*" she wrote ~ "Never whine. Whining lets a brute know that a victim is in the neighborhood."

Our God never designed us to be victims! Our Christ was never a victim! And we must watch our thoughts and actions that we also never succumb to a victim, whiny, mentality. We are being called to be people of joy! And with joy come an energy and a desire to do and be - this joy helps us to overcome so much!

Have you ever noticed that on days where you wake up expecting something dreadful you ache all over and walk slowly, perhaps joints hurt, and the brain is slow. Whereas on days where you expect something wonderful there is a spring in you step and if you do have pain, you don't seem to notice?

We are being asked to prepare ourselves for the presence of Christ every day. According to Philip H. Pfatteicher, "Since the time of Bernard of Clairvaux (d.1153) Christians have spoken of the three comings of Christ: in the flesh in Bethlehem, in our hearts daily, and in glory at the end of time."

The transformation theme of today's scriptures refer to promises from the past which point a future joy, but we live in the now, so let us focus on what we can do now for God, for joy, and in doing so now, we create a transformation process.

It started with our responsive reading: Mary's Magnificat referring to a radical reversal of power! "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed." This lowly maiden is chosen by God to carry divinity, and she knows that she will carry the joy and the burden of that responsibility for the rest of her life, and she knows that her reputation will go on into the rest of the history of the universe as we know it. What a reversal of fortunes! Unexpected, accepted, glorified!

For a moment, let us all take the words, "my soul magnifies the Lord," into our own souls. Bring those words into your hearts, believe that they are true - that each and every one of us here can say, or hope, believe, have faith, trust that OUR SOULS MAGNIFY THE LORD!!!! Our souls magnify the Lord . . . this is what Advent is about - this Advent of every day of every year, not just this one season on the church calendar! We have been chosen, we have chosen, to follow Christ, and in doing so, our souls reflect God. May we serve as magnifying what we have in us of the sacred and offering it to the universe!

Paul Simpson Duke: "This poem holds a prominent place . . . in four strong lines of imperative . . . Strengthen weak ands! Straighten feeble knees! Tell the fearful-hearted: be strong! do not fear! (vv 3-4). So the promises are not dreamy, but insist on real consequences inhuman action and spirit. The vision wants an incarnation in lips, hands, knees, and unterrified hearts."

Bruce Birch: "Exile is replaced by return. The despair of those who were cut off from the future is replaced by the joy of those who see a new and unexpected future become possible."

A new and unexpected future is possible - the desert will bloom! (pass out desert flower photos).

Here is a promise from God ~ Incarnation will occur . . . this is the promise of ancient writings and present sighs and whispers of the Holy Spirit. AMEN