

Sunday December 17, 2017 – 3 Advent, Year B – Tim Hall

(Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28)

I love when Advent rolls around each year. This year, I was particularly moved to think of it as the beginning of the year. Away with this secular notion that the new year always begins on January 1st. I like the idea that the new year always begins on a Sunday. After all, that means that New Year's Eve is always a Saturday night!

But really, as Christians, doesn't it make sense for us to begin our new year on the Lord's Day. The day He looked at his creation and said, "It is very good" and then rested. I know, it was really the end of the 7 days of creation when God rested. But for us, it seems like the perfect time to take stock of the old year, make our resolutions for the new year, prepare the way.

Recall the hymn we sang during Advent Lessons & Carols a couple of weeks ago... "People Look East the time is near, of the crowning of the year." What exactly does that mean... the "crowning" of the year? In agricultural terms, it's the time when a plant begins to emerge from the ground. Or it can indicate that time when we see the top of a newborn baby's head emerging from the birth canal. It can mean recognition as the best, as in "a crowning achievement". The culmination of something.

So if this is really the beginning of the year, how can we arrive at the best part, the final part, when we're just getting started. It's because, as John the Baptist proclaims from the wilderness in John's Gospel, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. And further, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." Untying the thongs of sandals was a slave's job. A slave would have to bend down to untie the sandals of feet that had walked on dusty and dirty unpaved roads. Yet John, wildly popular at that time, claiming crowds of followers, has the humility to say that he is lower than a slave compared to the one he is about to introduce to them as the Light. And even before that, last week we heard Mark's very first words proclaim, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

We've heard the tales of anticipation. The angel Gabriel visiting both Zechariah and Mary to proclaim the beginning of the story of redemption and salvation for his people that the Lord is undertaking. Elizabeth with child, who will proclaim the coming. Mary, gracefully accepting the blessing of her God. John and Jesus. These two knew from the very beginning that they were destined to change the world. No, more than that... to SAVE the world. When Mary visited Elizabeth in her sixth month, the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt with joy at the sound of Mary's greeting, the arrival of the mother of the Lord.

After the beautiful birth stories we hear in Luke's Gospel.. the Song of Mary, the Song of Zechariah, the Holy Birth, the blessing of the baby Jesus in the Temple... we hear very little

more of John and Jesus until we join John in the wilderness, a grown man wearing rough clothes and eating locust, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. But you know, thirty years have passed and the boys, now become men, have known each other and their destinies, all along. Surely Zechariah, a priest in the Temple, has reminded his son over and over again those very words of the Song of Zechariah, that we often sing from Wonder Love and Praise. “You are a gift from God. He blessed your mother and me when you were born. He named you. The angel of the Lord visited me and told me all that you would do. Listen to the Lord. Read and learn his holy scriptures. Prepare yourself to hear His call and do his work.”

John and Jesus grew up as any cousins would, seeing each other regularly and especially for the holidays... the Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukah. They shared their family stories. They may have studied together in the temple. Surely the boy Jesus knew his “Uncle Zech” almost as well as he knew his own parents. Our one glimpse we have of him is as a 12-year old in the temple in Jerusalem, teaching the elders who are amazed by his wisdom. Jesus and John were surely preparing themselves to bring the Lord’s salvation to those suffering in the wilderness. To those living on the margins of almost everything that is defined by the modern Western world as “the good life.”

How do we balance this great joy we feel in anticipation of the coming of the Lord? At the beautiful promise we read in Isaiah that the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all people (or “flesh” in the King James translation) shall see it together? That the Lord will lead his flock like a shepherd, gathering them up in his arms and lovingly carrying them in his bosom, with the reality we see around us every day? How do we balance this joy against the unending reports of injustice? The wars. Persecution. Starvation. Disease. Suffering. The world is still a broken place. A wilderness.

The experience of wilderness is common to the vast majority of people in the world. This wilderness has not been created by accident. It is the result of a system stacked against billions of people and their communities, whose lives and resources are exploited to benefit a very small minority at the centers of power and privilege. It is created by lifestyles that deplete and pollute natural resources. It is created by the forced labor of impoverished farmers who strip steep mountainsides in order to eke out an existence from infertile terrain while the most arable land produces profit for a few families. Wilderness is the residue of war and greed and injustice.

But God has told us how to fix it. He tells us time and time again. He provides us with examples to follow, and examples not to follow, over and over in his Word. And he gave us his word made flesh, his beloved son, Jesus, as a final offering for our sins. And not for ours alone, but for the sins of the whole world. He told us in our Gospel reading on Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of Pentecost just three weeks ago, when Christ is crowned in his glory metes out the final judgment, “Truly I tell you, just as you did to the least of these, you did to me, and just as you did not do to the least of these, you did not do to me.” This is the same admonition we

hear at the end of every year... do this, love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your mind and with all your sole, and love your neighbor as yourself” and you will be with me in salvation. The prophet Micah told us so clearly, “He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

Evil will be always be with us. The wilderness will always exist. But if we can but do our small part to further God’s Kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven, if together we humbly strive for justice and mercy in God’s name, if we love and care for our neighbors, our neighbors next door and down the street, and our global neighbors... then the crowning of the year, the birth of our savior and redeemer, who endured our earthly existence so that God himself would better understand us, who taught us and will be crowned on the last day, will surely lead to our salvation and the salvation of the world.

We can do it. As Paul tells us this morning, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

In this Advent season we rejoice in the coming of our Lord. We strive to help lift up the valleys and make the hills low. We refocus our lives on getting our spiritual houses in order. We prepare for the celebration of the redeeming power of God given as a gift, by grace, to us. We crown our Christmas trees with stars or angels, remembering the words of that Advent carol...

Angels announce with shouts of mirth, Christ who brings new life to Earth.

Set every peak and valley humming with the word, the Lord is coming.

People, look East and sing today, Love the Lord is on the way.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.

After her humiliating defeat by Babylon, Israel was broken. The movers and shakers who had kept the society going were taken to Babylon where they couldn't move or shake any more. Then, fifty years later, the prophet known as Second Isaiah proclaimed comfort to Jerusalem: the exiles will return, travelling through the desert on "a highway for our God." Jerusalem will be made whole once again! This return of the exiles is a new thing, at least as great a new thing as God's delivery of the Jews out of Egypt. Not only that, but, like the earlier new thing, this deliverance is a re-creation of the world by the God who is now proclaimed to be the sole creator of the world out of nothing.

René Girard suggested that the leveling of mountains and valleys stood for the leveling of society that precipitates a sacrificial crisis. I have a counter Girardian suggestion: the leveling of the desert landscape is God's removing of the obstacles that prevent us from seeing God. The obstacles here are the social tensions created through mimetic rivalry that tear a society apart. For Isaiah, this levelling is God's work and removing obstacles is what God does. God does not create social crises; humans do that. Isaiah said that, with the highway smoothed out, "all flesh" will see the glory of the Lord." Not only that, but if a Gentile king had made this return possible, how much greater would the outreach be from Jerusalem to all Gentiles once the Jewish nation was reunited?

But such was not to be. The Jewish nation broke again and this time it was the Jews who broke it, not the Babylonians. Denunciations of social injustice protested by the Isaiahic prophets before the Exile were repeated by Isaiah's successors after the exile. The movers and shakers who had returned from exile also returned to moving and shaking at the expense of their weaker Jews. An anonymous victim, known as the "Suffering Servant" paid the price for the nation's brokenness. The mountains and valleys had been recreated and the glory of the Lord was hidden once again.

"The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ" is the opening of Mark's Gospel. The Greek word "arche" also refers to the ultimate beginning of creation and the two attempted re-creations in Jewish history. Mark quotes the words of Isaiah to announce that once again (or still) God is creating a highway for God. So it is that the subsequent appearance of Jesus and his baptism by John is yet a new beginning for humanity. Once again God is removing the obstacles and just as quickly, humans are putting the obstacles back in place, with the result that Jesus was left hanging on a cross.

By coming round every year, the Season of Advent proclaims God's removing of obstacles so that all of us, together, can see the Glory of the Lord. Will we join God, at least a little, in the work of removing obstacles so that we can glimpse the glory the obstacles hide?

The Hand of God on the Shoulder of a Troubled World

3rd Sunday of Advent - Year B - December 11, 2011

I'm going to reveal something very personal about myself here at the outset. When I was a child, one of my favorite programs was *HeeHaw*. A few of you may remember that show. It had a lot of bluegrass and country music. Folks were laying around in the hay, thinking about going down to the corner of town to watch the stop light turn green. It had other characters that must have made an impression on an adolescent boy, but I won't get into that.

HeeHaw also had Grady Nutt. Grady was a Baptist preacher, a comedian, and he came to be known as the *prime minister of humor*. He had a saying, "Laughter is the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world."

That's where I want to begin as we focus on God's gift of joy on this third Sunday of Advent. ***Laughter is the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world.*** Laughter is a gift of God, a gift that we need in these days, in these holidays, when in a world of terrorism and road rage, estrangement and outsourcing, ***all is not calm and all is not bright.*** The writer of the Proverbs knew about this gift and our need for it: A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones. (Proverbs 17. 22)

There is something about humor that brings us life, and the scriptures today hint at this:

The prophet Isaiah: ***I will greatly rejoice in the Lord.***

The psalmist: ***Our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.***

And the Apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians: ***Rejoice always.***

We all need something that brings us to life, like a desert rejoicing and blossoming, like water in the desert.

"Have you heard any good jokes lately?" Just that comment is enough to bring us out of the doldrums, to lift our spirits, to fill us with anticipation. Here's one:

There was a cantankerous, crabby old man. His neighbors avoided him. His four boys moved away from home as soon as they could. You get the picture. His ***poor wife*** with no escape, was longsuffering in his presence.

Then, one night he went to bed and just slipped away. His four boys were called in. What should they do? "He was hard to live around, and no one could get along with him, but he was our pa. We owe him a decent burial, out in the meadow beyond the field."

So they went out to the barn and found some boards and made a casket. They put their Pa in it, lifted the box to their shoulders, and carried it out past the barn. As they passed through the gate, one of the boys bumped into the post and this caused them to drop the box. The casket broke open and the cantankerous, crabby old man sat straight up.

He had only been in a very deep... sleep!

Well, life got back to normal. He lived two more years, just as ornery and mean, cantankerous and crabby as ever. The boys could go back to their homes, but his ***poor wife*** had to stay with him.

Then one night he went to bed and just slipped away.

His four boys were called in. What should they do now? "Well, he was hard to live around, and no one could get along with him, but he was our pa. We owe him a decent burial, out in the meadow beyond the field."

So they went out to the barn and found some boards and made another casket and put the old man in it yet again. They put the box on their shoulders and started out of the house. As they did their mother, the old man's wife said, "Boys, when you get out by the barn...for heaven's sake be careful going through that gate."

We need humor in our lives. It is like *the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world*. It is like the desert rejoicing and blossoming. In the midst of the laughter, it is as if the sorrow and sighing flees away. The message of the prophet Isaiah is so relevant for us because it acknowledges the pain and the loss and the devastation the people had been through; and at the same time, it points to something beyond the present condition.

The creation will be renewed.

The ruined cities will be rebuilt.

The exiles will come home.

The oppressed will hear the good news.

Those who mourn will be comforted.

Near the end of his life, Jesus gathered his disciples and said to them, "You will weep and mourn, you will have pain, but your pain will be turned to joy. No one will take your joy from you...In the world you will have persecution." And then, he says, in the King James Version, "But be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world." (John 16. 20, 33)

somber, but something else:

The hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world

We need to laugh. "**Rejoice**," Paul writes the Thessalonians...*do not quench the spirit!* And what is the fruit of that spirit? **Joy**. Sometimes, even in the toughest times, we need an experience of joy.

It is acceptable to laugh, to smile, to have fun as people of God. *We take the faith seriously, but we don't have to take ourselves too seriously*. Chesterton was right. "Angels can fly because they take themselves so lightly."

And so we hear the word of the Lord, on this third Sunday of Advent, and in many faith communities we will light the candle of **joy**. Ultimately, our joy is all about who Jesus is. After his time of testing in the desert, which paralleled Israel's exile, Jesus is worshipping in the synagogue in Nazareth, and he is reading the scripture for the people, and he opens the Book of Isaiah to this very passage:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then Jesus closes the book and sits down. And everyone is looking at him. And then he says to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

And in that moment, *we get it*. It's like the ending to a wonderful story and we get it; we sense that "this is where it was leading to all along." We rejoice, we laugh, even in the midst of pain and loss and devastation, because in Jesus we hear the deep resonant laughter of God.

So, people of God: be joyful!

Discover some occasion for laughter.

Do not quench the spirit.

Let the waters flow in the desert.

Let the weeping turn to laughter.

Let the desert become a garden.

Rejoice! You are not alone.

That embrace may be *the hand of God on the shoulder of a troubled world*.

Let us pray. O God, in this season, remind us that we are not alone. Help us to continue to pray without ceasing and encourage us to rejoice always and to know that your hand is upon us. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

~ *The Rev. Dr. Kenneth Carter, Bishop of the Florida Conference of the United Methodist Church*

Do Not Despise the Words of Prophets

Advent 3, Year B – December 17, 2017

[RCL] [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#); [Canticle 15](#); [1 Thessalonians 6:16-24](#); [John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

Listen to the words of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners.

Listen to the words of Mary of Nazareth:

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

Listen to John the Baptizer:

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. . .”

Listen and try to remember. Do you know any who are oppressed? Have you met with people who are brokenhearted? Have you ever been a captive or have you visited a prisoner?

Now, change direction and remember the mighty on their thrones. Identify them; call out their names as you pray to God, as Mary did, to cast them down. For they are the ones who cause oppression, who take away liberty and make prisoners of the innocent.

Lift up the lowly, oh Lord, we cry with Mary. Fill the hungry with good things. Send the rich away empty, for they are the ones who have emptied everything the poor ever had.

Is any of us courageous enough to cry out with Mary? Yet, this is what the prophets have seen and have proclaimed throughout the centuries. And the people laugh at them while the prophetic voices echo, like that of John’s, in the wilderness.

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John.” This was a real man; he had a mother and a father—Zechariah and Elizabeth. Yet, he was sent from God. He was a prophet. “Who are you?” the people asked, taunting him. Who gave you the right to call us to repentance, to baptize your followers, to remind us of our sins? Who are you?

“I am a voice crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.”

They are familiar with the words of the great prophets of their tradition. But what they don’t know is what he tells them next. “I came as a witness to the light,” he announces, and then he personifies the light— “so that all might believe through *him*.” He is talking about light not as a

phenomenon or an effect, but as a person. “I myself am not this light,” John the humble, the profound, tells them, “but I have come to give witness to this light.” And his courageous, prophetic voice continues with the surprising statement: “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.”

Untying the thongs of sandals was a slave’s job. A slave would have to bend down to untie the sandals of feet that had walked on dusty and dirty unpaved roads. Yet John, wildly popular at that time, claiming crowds of followers, has the humility to say that he is lower than a slave compared to the one he is about to introduce to them as the Light.

Truth, humility, and self-awareness: these are marks of the prophet. There are other marks made visible in the life of Jesus.

A modern-day prophet, the peacemaker Father John Dear, has identified six marks of the prophet in his book on the Beatitudes. One of them is that “the prophet stands in solidarity with the poor, the powerless, and the marginalized. . . . A prophet becomes a voice for the voiceless. Indeed, a prophet is the voice of a voiceless God.” At a time when the poor are despised and neglected, at a time when the very rich rule our world, we need to listen to the prophets who consistently remind us to pay attention. Advent is the right time for paying attention. Remember the oppressed, the voiceless, the widows, the orphans, the poor, we are reminded by the prophets.

Another mark of the prophets is that they are always concerned with justice and peace.

Justice and peace are at the heart of God, John Dear reminds us. Not in some future afterlife, but here, on this earth, “as it is in heaven.” We cannot have peace without justice.

Fearlessness and courage are the most evident marks of the prophet. We see those in John; we hear them in his cry, and we know that they brought him to the attention of one of those who sit on their thrones. John’s courage led to his gruesome death.

Jesus of Nazareth took the words of Isaiah and made them his own. He was filled with spirit of the Lord; he was the Lord’s anointed, the Christ. He too proclaimed good news to the poor as he bound the brokenhearted. He was the Light, the evangelist tells us, and the Light cannot be put out; it flickers, but it is not extinguished.

John the Baptizer was a witness to this light. We too are asked to be witnesses to the Light. We cannot have courage to proclaim the good news in a culture filled with the idols of wealth, weapons, and war unless we are filled and guided by God’s light.

Do not despise the words of the prophets, St. Paul reminds us. This Advent, as always, may we be filled with their passion for justice and peace and with their courage and fearlessness as we too seek to witness to the Light. Amen.

Katerina Whitley is an author, a retreat leader, and a social justice advocate. She has worked as an Episcopal communicator on the diocesan and national church level for four decades. The author of seven books, she lives in Boone and teaches at Appalachian State University. She lectures on St Paul and the First Century as the author of A New Love which is centered on the ministry of the great apostle. She invites you to visit her website, www.katerinawhitley.net.