



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Liberation and Joy

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

December 14, 2014

This week in Advent is all about Joy, but at first blush today's reading from Isaiah does not seem to fit the bill. In fact, it is often heard around here during funerals. What we do hear, however, is a clear message of hope, in a time of distress, and with it we are reminded how Joy emerges from hope.

The book of Isaiah was most likely written over several centuries, in two or three distinct parts. Beginning in chapter 40, the book is addressing the people of Israel, during their Babylon captivity. Their region had been conquered in 586 BCE, the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, and their king killed. Suddenly, they find themselves once again enslaved. But then some 50 years later, the Babylonian Empire fell to Cyrus the Great, who was so respectful of the regions cultures and religions that he allowed captive communities in Babylon to return to their homes to rebuild. In Chapter 44 of Isaiah, Cyrus is even referred to as Messiah, the one who delivered the people from their captivity.

As the returning people of Israel made their way back across the desert to Jerusalem and started to rebuild their lives, they might have been full of hope, but joy remained elusive. Overcoming the shame of having been conquered and enslaved again would take time, and everything did not go smoothly when they got to Jerusalem. Infighting between those who had remained in Jerusalem and those who suffered in Babylonian captivity; perhaps a feeling of disconnect among those who had been born in captivity and only knew of Israel from tales of a bygone era; there was rampant bickering, jealousies, prejudice, and injustice. The time had not yet arrived when suffering is turned into joy, as our psalm proclaims.

So today, in the 61st chapter of the Book of Isaiah, a new vision is provided, one that not only gives new hope and guidance to the people of Israel returned from captivity but a vision for all, a vision of what the world will look like when all nations hear and heed the word of God—the word about mercy, justice, and love. And from this great story of Babylonian captivity and return comes the foundation for a whole new kind of hope, a whole new theology, and one that is valid today as it was 2500 years ago. Just as was true for the people of Israel, today the whole world longs for joy, the whole of humanity seeks desperately for the means to turn suffering into joy, and therein is our message for this Advent Sunday.

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Interestingly, this part of Isaiah mentions specifically release for the prisoners and it brought to mind a story I heard from a colleague in California, which adds even more meaning to today's message. It is the story of a beautiful young woman, a teacher, who took on the daunting task of teaching in one a maximum security prisons. All of her friends were concerned, partly because she was so beautiful. She did endure a fair amount of crude attention when she started teaching her classes, but she persevered and seemed to have developed a rapport with the inmates whom she had come to know. And then one night in the middle of her class, there was a power failure, and the prison was plunged into darkness. She had been sitting on her desk as she spoke to the class. In the darkness, she froze, barely breathing, as she began to hear stirring in the room. Soon she felt movement around her. No one spoke. Then suddenly the prison generators kicked in and there was light again. In the sudden light she blinked, then saw what had happened--in a tight circle around her, every member of her class stood motionless with their backs to her and arms locked together. After a moment, they let go and went quietly back to their seats.

It's hard to imagine a greater sign of respect than that. Perhaps they were just prepared to protect her from what might come through the door, or they knew that if they held on to each other protecting their teacher, no one of them might be tempted to do something untoward, in a moment of weakness. I think they had been genuinely moved by the love and respect this beautiful young woman had shown them, and they responded as anyone who is loved would. I think it was also what happens when humans learn how to turn suffering into joy. Isaiah called for release for the prisoners. I cannot imagine a more beautiful human experience than the release that some or all of those inmates must experienced when they realized that, maximum security prison or not, they still had the power to choose how to respond, how to behave, how to show respect, and perhaps even love to someone who done the same for them.

My guess is that many of you are familiar with this phenomenon, though you may not have thought of it in those terms while you were in the midst of your experience. It starts with the sense of satisfaction that you have endured some circumstance thrust upon and unwanted with some measure of grace. You begin to experience the wonder of Paul's well known formula--how tribulation brings on endurance, endurance leads to perseverance, perseverance feeds courage, and courage gives rise to hope. And then, finally, toward the end of the process, you are filled with the exquisite sensation that in choosing to be strong and faithful, you have arrived at joy. I can only imagine what great satisfaction those prisoners must have felt as they returned to their desks, knowing that they were no longer controlled by their suffering but instead being able to bask in the supreme joy of having connected deeply with someone whom they had not known at all just weeks earlier.

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Is that our experience of Advent? Do we look forward to the birth of Christ in the most metaphorical of ways, anticipating, hoping for an experience that will move us into a new vision for our lives, our community, our entire global village? Can we find the joy of knowing Christ in a way that we had not known him before, perhaps as Marcus Borg so intriguingly put it in the title of his marvelous book, *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time*? We don't have to have suffered like the people of Israel who endured captivity in Babylon, or prisoners who have lost the full experience of life to the confines of a maximum security. Perhaps we don't need to have suffered at all but just need to wake up from the deep slumber of what it means to live beneath our Christian potential. Whatever your circumstance, Advent is the time to throw open the portals and find new joy in who you are, and what God promises us. We are the people of his pasture, and we have been given a shepherd who wants more than anything that we would discover the joy of wanting more for others than we even want for ourselves.

This is the spirit of Christmas. This is the joy of Advent. When Christmas day comes we follow the tradition of giving gifts, not so that we can receive but so that we might have the opportunity to give, to provide joy to another. But the Christmas season is not about Christmas Day as it is about Advent, and the joy we find in Advent comes from discovering ourselves, from discovering, like those prisoners in maximum security, that practicing mercy, justice, and love is the most supremely joyful experience that we can have in life. Joy to the World, the Savior gives us hope that we will choose to cast aside our fearful ways and experience the full community of God's Kingdom on Earth!

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