

12-17 SermonB18Advent3

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 6: 6-8, 19-28

My Disclaimer for preaching this morning begins with the fact that we've already met up with John the Baptist this Advent Season. So, I'm not going to reference the reading from John much today. I will say at the outset though that there is one particular point of intersection between the Gospel and the lesson. Both turn around the notion of light conquering the darkness and gloom that we encounter in life and in human existence. Today, we can think of that light in terms of an emotional light ... to be specific lightheartedness. Both readings point to the lightheartedness that we typically describe as the emotion *joy*. Joy is our theme for today.

As we prepare to look at the gospel and the reading through the lens of joy, let's prepare with our customary prayer:

Most gracious God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts bring light, hope, peace and joy in your presence. AMEN

Back in my previous parish in Star Prairie, Wisconsin, we developed a custom on Christmas Eve of dramatizing a children's Christmas book for the first service. Even though it was a small church in a small rural-ish town church people were just as busy as they are here in the greater Olympia metropolitan area. To accommodate that calendar dynamic we only had a few actors and highly suggestive but sparse stage sets and costumes. One year we only had two actors, Herb Struss and his daughter Samantha – who everyone called Sammy. The story that we presented to the congregation in lieu of a sermon at the 4 pm Christmas Eve Service was titled Great Joy. If any of you want to look it up it's written by the author Kate DiCamillo and beautifully illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline.

The story begins just before Christmas sometime around the early part of this century. An organ grinder and a monkey appear outside of the apartment that is home to a young girl

named Frances and her family. The girl observes the man and his little companion during the day and when it is quiet, especially at night, she can hear music from the grinder organ. One night she sees them sleeping outside. The next day when passing them by on the sidewalk Frances invites them to come to the Christmas pageant at church. With these things in her heart Frances faithfully attends rehearsals for the church Christmas pageant in which she has the second most coveted girl part in the story. Frances has been assigned the role of the an angel who announces Jesus' birth to the shepherds tending their flocks in the hills above Bethlehem. Frances mother has been working each night on her beautiful befeathered costume.

Now, you might think that having the part with the best costume on stage would make Frances's heart sing with joy. The problem, however is that Frances has stage fright and she is terrified that the one line that she to speak will stop right behind her lips and not come out of her mouth. When the day of the pageant finally arrives the nativity story is played out by all the characters one after another. Even the littlest of the actors shines in the performance of their parts. But, when it is Frances time to speak all she can think about is the sad eyes of both the organ grinder and his monkey. Then, just as she is about to break down into tears she sees a sight that fills every corner of her heart with light. Coming through the door at the end of the long church aisle is the organ grinder and his little monkey. Bursting forth in radiance from head to toe, Frances announces to the shepherds and all of the members of the congregation that she brings them, "Tidings of GREAT JOY!" As the play comes to a close they all sing *Joy to the World*. Reaching the last verse everyone hugs and smiles and laughs. Then, of course, they have cake and punch and coffee in fellowship hall.

When I was thinking about the story this week I realized how much everyone in my family and just about everyone I know loves children's Christmas stories. I realized also how nearly every one follows the same pattern. The stories begin with something that tugs at the strings of the readers' and the listeners' hearts ... some sad tale that arouses our sympathy,

empathy and compassion. It might be an orphan child, or a father who has lost his job or a small polar bear who sets off to find the North Pole and loses his way. The main character struggles through a good portion of the book and inevitably there are people or animals along the way. I would say that there are angels sometimes too, but I think that the people and the animals are meant to be seen as angels anyway. So, in the end I guess its always angels that come alongside the one who is sad or struggling or lonely. The point is, that the stories always begin with sadness. And ... they always end with comfort and GREAT JOY.

It's a little hard to tell from the few verses that we have from Isaiah today, but that same pattern of sadness turning to joy is the main theme of the entire book of Isaiah. In fact, it's the overarching pattern of the whole story of salvation. Sadness and heartache come upon God's people in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve fail to trust God's word and promise to them ... when they listen to Satan and ignore the cautions that God has given them about eating of the fruit of the *Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil*. By the time the prophet Isaiah writes his words the people of Israel have over and again in their words and in their actions confused evil and good. Like us they have forgotten about justice and began to call greed good ... they just gave it a new name: success. As a consequence, God becomes sad and brokenhearted. God steps back and bad things began to happen to the people. They fall or are carried away into dark and desparate places. And, in those places they have time and space and silence in which they call to mind all the things that God has told them about living well together. Most often, they have a little help from a prophet who is well versed in scripture and has been listening to God all along.

This week I've been listening to a series of lectures on the writing of the prophet Isaiah on a Jewish web-site called The Chabad Jewish Discovery Center. The rabbi that I have been listening to was lecturing on the important role that sadness and despair play in restoring our relationship with God. The rabbi said, "Sadness is like a medicine. You don't give medicine to a healthy person because to a healthy person medicine is like poison. You don't give it to someone who is healthy. You give them a piece of bread. You give them a bagel.

You DO give poison to someone who is sick. You give them the poison to wake them up. The medicine alone is poison, but you can put it to some good use. Sometimes a person puts up a wall. There is a blockage to God and to other people. You are spiritually dead inside. There is no love of others. There is no love for yourself. There is no love for God. You need something to break through this so you can feel something again. The poison brings you pain. Because you feel the pain you wake up to the love. You can feel the joy in life again.”

There is a lot of wisdom in the rabbi’s words I think. It’s not just his wisdom either. It is the wisdom of God in the book of Isaiah and all of scripture. It is the wisdom of death and resurrection; the wisdom of light and darkness where the light means nothing without the darkness to stand in contrast. The rabbi ends his wise message by quoting another rabbi hundreds of years before him. He says, “There is nothing more whole than a broken heart.” When the heart is broken, he says, “The love can shine through. When pain penetrates the heart and shatters it into a thousand pieces there are openings and you can feel again.”

If you have ever suffered from a broken heart you will feel the wisdom and the blessing in those words to the depths of your being. There will be contentment in the knowledge that as you live and breath today you too have experienced the grace of light shining in the darkness even if it is the tiniest glimmer of hope lighting up your night. You will know the wholeness that comes only after one is shattered ... a wholeness that is somehow more whole than you were before the shadows lengthened and the silence descended. The good news today, I think, is that even the darkness is a gift in God’s hands ... a gift not a curse ... if only we are willing to trust that God is Lord of All and that ashes are just garlands in the making.

AMEN