

Homily for the 3rd Sunday of Advent

December 14-15, 2019

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-6a,10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Preacher: Deirdre McKiernan Hetzler

“Rejoice in the Lord always! And again, I say, rejoice!” Do the words of this Sunday's entrance prayer seem a bit incongruous in light of the times we live in?

How must the Israelites have felt, receiving Isaiah's message? They had suffered through decades of exile. Their spirit and their strength sapped by the years of bondage. So, in beautiful poetic language, the prophet offers them hope of a new day. The loveliness of creation reaching its fullness! A world charged with the grandeur of God! Isaiah then draws their attention to their one source of strength and salvation. They will see the glory of God. “Be strong! Do not fear!” See! Your God is here! God will come with vindication! Then the blind will see. The deaf hear. The lame will leap, the mute sing. Sorrow and sighing will be no more.

Jesus names these very same signs in response to the questions John the Baptist's disciples pose. “Are you the One to come, or are we to wait for another?” Many in Israel, perhaps even John, expected a very different Messiah. One coming with fire and brimstone. A winnowing fork in hand. Bringing judgment. Not one who comes with mercy, forgiveness, and healing. But Jesus responds: The blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them. Wholeness. Shalom! Humanity fully alive and thriving! Every single human being valued. Signs of the Kingdom of God. And blessed is anyone who doesn't take offense.

After John's disciples leave, Jesus turns to ask the crowd : “What did you go out to the wilderness to look at?...What then did you did you go out to see?” A Prophet? Yes. And more than a prophet. John obviously held great appeal for the people of his time. Yet Jesus adds “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” Imagine!

Perhaps that strikes you and me as hyperbole. Too much to even imagine

or hope for. And yet, God's Spirit, given to each of us in Baptism, is the force that enables us to grow in our ability to bring that promise to fruition. To cooperate in bringing about the reign of God. A Kingdom of healing, forgiveness, and peace. Where humanity is fully alive and thriving.

Impossible, you say? “Just look at the polarized environment in our church and our country! Like the Israelites, our spirit and strength are sapped.” But wait! We, too have been offered hope. Our faith reminds us of the One source of our strength and salvation. The One for whom nothing is impossible. The one whose coming we prepare for in Advent.

One of the most polarized environments in the world has to have existed in Northern Ireland. Now, the winds of change are blowing, even if softly. I recently met a Presbyterian minister—a Unionist from Derry—whose leap of faith had a significant impact. Faced with repeated sectarian damage to his church building, he asked for help from the leader of the opposition—Nationalist—party. A former IRA commander! Very tentatively, they began to meet. Briefly, at first. Then gradually, getting to know each other's family. Over time, a deep friendship developed. They worked together on occasional cross-community events. Reaching out to those on both sides who had suffered from the violence. Some of the hardliners in his congregation left. There were threats, as well, but David persisted. With his friend Martin's support, peace-building programs were established in over 400 schools and colleges. And continue their work.

You and I may have a smaller world in which to build up the Kingdom. Perhaps it's in our families, our neighborhood, or our work environment. Even Facebook! But as we look forward to celebrating the birth of the Virgin's Son, we remember that nothing is impossible with God. As our souls wait in the stillness that Advent calls us to, can we see the Spirit at work in the world around us? In ourselves, as well?

This Advent, we turn to the One who is the source of our strength and salvation. Whose word is trustworthy. We wait in hope. To wait for Christ to come in his fullness is above all else to act in Christ's stead as fully as we know how. Advent expectation is about its promise to transform our vision and hope. And our hope is rooted in faith in the promises of God. And so

we rejoice. Our God is here! Our God is coming to save us!