

"Joy of Now" Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:47-55  
Delivered to Church for the Highlands  
Sunday, December 12, 2010  
Rev. John Henson

"Here is your God." These are powerful words, probably the most powerful in our readings today. Perhaps even the most powerful in the Bible itself. These are the words heard long ago by the Hebrew people, who were accustomed to the quality of life in their homeland once flowing with milk and honey but who now knew only the dry dreariness of the wilderness. These were words heard by them as they remembered what it once was like to have hands that didn't hurt and knees that weren't feeble. These were words heard by those who could not hear and for those who could not speak. They were words for the always anxious, "Here is your God." These were words given by the prophet Isaiah to his people in exile, for a people who had lot of reasons for asking, "God, where are you?" and "Where will you be?" And they were words that were to bring joy to those who heard them, as we hear them again now, *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. And, 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.* And this joy was not about the past, not just out in the future, but in the here and now for them.

And we are so beautifully reminded this morning of the words that came to Mary, who was also in an exile of sorts and whose friends, relatives and fellow worshipers were wondering when God would show up. The words are not exactly the same as those that came from God through the mouth of Isaiah, but it was a Word that came to rest inside of Mary; in her very womb. For her, it was less a phrase and more just one word. The Word. She carried within her this word, dispelling her fear and anxieties. The Word within her was God and, as she pondered this new reality, she couldn't help but burst forth in song. "Here is your God" is the tune of her song, as she discovered the magnificence of the presence of God within her. God was here. This moment wasn't about the past and was no longer was about something looming, possibly to happen in the future. It was now. God had arrived. God was in her . . . now. It was just as Isaiah had said and it was just as true for her, for the lame, sick, enslaved and exiled then as it was hundreds of years earlier with Isaiah, "Here is your God."

Charles Dickens always comes to mind and to conversation during the Christmas season, as we hear or tell the Christmas story and collectively glean the message to be generous and very anti-scrooge-like in our world. But, another story of Dickens came to my mind this week, Great Expectations. Do you remember reading this one? I seem to recall reading this one in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. About all I can remember is about

the main character, Miss Havisham, whose name has become a cultural reference for people who are stuck in the past. You probably recall what happened to this woman who was much in love and had everything in life going for her. It was all going for her until the love of her life betrayed her and left her cold at the altar of marriage. She was never able to move forward, other than adopting a daughter and seeking to live vicariously through her, holding out hope for a better future in some way.

I remember the imagery of this woman, getting it ingrained in my memory whether from reading it or watching the movie. Ok, maybe it was the Cliff Notes. But, as Dickens described her, I see her in house, sitting amongst all of the wedding decorations in her wedding dress now tattered and torn by the decades that have passed since she was left at the altar and cheated out of not only her money but also her love. What you see is the darkness of the room, the wedding cake that has gone uneaten and is now rotten, and the clocks she forever froze in time at the minute she was betrayed.

Miss Havisham's joy had been so tied to what was and might have been that she completely missed what was available to her in her present. She was held captive by the past and led astray by an unhealthy hope in the future. What a picture of sadness.

And how sad for us when we are like her. There is a little or a lot of Miss Havisham in all of us, isn't there? We all can lose touch of the joy in life, unable to move out of what might have been and what we hope may be again that we miss what is or can be now. We become like her when we remain in the past, sitting there in her dress and furnishings of earlier days, unaware of the present and unable to see ahead into the future.

We of today need to hear what Isaiah, the people in exile and Mary heard long ago, these words that forever ring true, "... Here is your God."

We need to hear this from God because we are still those who can so easily get stuck in the past and the joy is tied to it. You may remember the day when you weren't in exile; when the milk and honey of God's goodness seemed to flow abundantly and when things were as they should be; when they were as you always wanted them to be. It is this longing for the day that once was that keeps you and me from finding the arrival and presence of God dwelling in our present.

This isn't to deny the pain of exile, the suffering that comes from weakening hands and feeble knees. Nor is it to deny the dry dustiness of the existence we have endured in so many ways. It is to not stay in the pain of the past but to be in the now; the now touched magnificently by the future. It is to do as Eckhart Tolle, in his book *The Power of Now*, states, "Focus your attention on the Now and tell me what problem you have at this moment."<sup>i</sup>

Even if we unHINGE ourselves from the past, we must beware that there is also the exile we can find ourselves in today. It is really not about today, but about what God will do in our future that will affect our today. We can be so busy worrying about

what must or will take place in days ahead that we completely miss what God is doing and wanting to do in our lives right now. Jesus had this challenge with his disciples and addressed it by calling them to see how the lilies of the field neither tarry nor toil. They don't worry about the past or the future. They just exist in the now. They just exist in all their beauty, fully dependent on the God who is at work in them now. And we are to hear this as well. Yes, we celebrate the hope of advent and the anticipation of things to come, but doing so fully in the present of our lives. God's future hope is abundantly available in the now.

I'm sure God's people in exile had a learning curve with all of this present joy, and so will we if it take it seriously. So, how do we do it? How do we take hold of it today?

We live in the joy of now when we, like Mary, acknowledge God's presence with and within us, singing Emmanuel with a real understanding of God's proximity to us. We live in the joy of now when we get still enough to taste our food, hear a bird, and feel the wind and to hear from God. It happens when we put away our phones and gadgets when with our children, parents and friends and be fully present in conversation. We find joy in the now when we cherish each day with our children, each tooth pulled, each birthday, each school program, each sporting event, realizing they will grow up soon enough and it will all seem like a flash. Joy comes to us now when we quit worrying about the past or future problems. And, as a church, we experience God's joy for us now when we get busy joining in with what God is doing right in front of us.

"Here is your God." It's just that simple. Or, it should be. We like Mary can find that it is not in the external things but is in the One we find within us. God with us and in us. This is the source of all our joy. So for the children among us—and that's really all of us—we must remember that we won't find this joy in the gifts, under the wrapping paper or even in a stocking. No, it is something you already have and you don't have to go far to look. You just have to be present.

James Harnish tells the story in *Homiletics* magazine about a tourist to the Holy Land who bought a ceramic nativity set in Bethlehem. As he prepared to leave to board his flight to return to the United States, the security guard asked him to unpack the box. He pulled out the figures of the wise men, the shepherds, Mary, Joseph and the baby. The security guard said, I'm very sorry, but I have to check each of these individually through the X-ray. The tourist asked, Why? It's a ceramic nativity set, after all! To which the security guard replied, Ah, these figures could contain explosives. And you know what? He was right!<sup>ii</sup>

Yes it is all very explosive, set to go off at any moment. Is today that moment?

---

<sup>i</sup> Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*. Page 119 of 379 of iBook version.

<sup>ii</sup> James A. Harnish, An Explosion of Joy, December 24, 1996, Tampa, Florida.  
Homiletics Online