

The Church of the Transfiguration

“The Little Church Around the Corner”

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A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)

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On this Sunday of Advent which is called Gaudete Sunday after the opening word in Latin of the traditional Epistle for the Day from Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” That rejoicing is echoed in the first reading from Isaiah: “rejoice with joy and singing.” The pink candle we have just lit is sign of this change of mood in the season. We can see change of mood in the first signs of the Christmas greening taken place and the EAG Christmas tree at the rear of the church in readiness for tomorrow night’s carol service. Daily we are aware of the approach of the great Feast of the First Advent in the Nativity of Christ with Christmas cards and gifts received and also to be written and purchased; with music like our Messiah on Friday night setting the tone of the coming season; with carols in the supermarket; Christmas trees to be trimmed; and wreaths to be hung. And here we are this morning baptizing Riley Elizabeth Huffman whose young life and the commitment of her parents and godparents is for us all a sign of hope in the future.

But the theme of rejoicing is a subtle one in this year’s readings. The first lesson is written to the people of Israel who were in exile from their own country; the lesson from James is addressed to a community which has suffered oppression; and the gospel begins with questions by John the Baptist in prison. Neither exile, nor oppression nor prison is the obvious place to rejoice. I have not experienced any of these; but I expect the effect of them could easily lead to apprehension, fear of the future, anger, boredom and despair. One only has to think of those who have been incarcerated in Guantanamo Bay

for many years or Nelson Mandela's 27 years in prison on Robben Island and wonder how human beings endure such deprivation and incarceration. Reading accounts of imprisonment of people like Terry Waite, the Archbishop of Canterbury's envoy, in Lebanon years ago the worst enemy was in his isolation not knowing what was going to happen and fearing the worst. Another way out of the predicament of exile or imprisonment would be to indulge in fantasy of the life of which you have been deprived and expect some return to that idealized life when you return or are released. In the case of Nelson Mandela the miracle was that instead of being embittered by the experience or going crazy he seemed to be ennobled by it and was transformed from a terrorist who believed in the violent overthrow of the state to a leader for peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Isaiah gave an incredible message to the Hebrew exiles: the prophet-poet sang of the saving activity of God who brings about restored relationship, climate change as well as restored health. Echoing that lesson from Isaiah last Sunday even the created order will respond to God's saving activity which will inaugurate God's peaceable kingdom. To a land which is made up largely of desert and semi-arid areas the prophet employs the language of blossoming and abundant water. This transformation is echoed in human health when the weak hands and feeble knees will be strengthened and made firm; when those with disabilities will be healed and restored. "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped." And God's people will be given a path which is direct and safe to tread: "A highway shall be there and it shall be called the Holy Way." And those who walk it will not get lost; they will be safe. This way will be the Way Home, the return to Jerusalem from whence they had come. And those who walk it shall sing; "everlasting joy will be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away." The prophet for all his cares and concerns for the future; for all his doubts about the ability of the exiles to fully respond; nevertheless he speaks the word of future hope with clarity and passion. For his faith is

firmly grounded in God: “Here is your God. He will come and save you.” With this ringing and singing vision Isaiah lifts the exiles out of their fears and despair and gives them new hope and anticipation of God’s saving purpose for them. It is a lesson that speaks to us today. As we tackle the multiple issues around providing food and resources to an ever-increasing population; as we consider the complex issues around climate change; as we address issues of poverty and inequity in our society; we could easily slip into pessimism or despair, thinking the problems are simply too big or insurmountable. But Isaiah reminds us not to forget who God is: God is the creator, redeemer and savior of the world and that the future is in God’s hands.

“Rejoice with joy and singing” says the prophet for you shall see the “glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God.”

Today’s Gospel sees a very different John the Baptist from last Sunday. Having been imprisoned by the wicked Herod, John had lost his audience and was consumed by questioning and doubt. He even wondered whether his certainty in pointing to Jesus as the “one who is to come” was correct. Perhaps the judging Christ he had imagined does not match up to Jesus’ ministry of love and reconciliation and healing. So consumed by doubt John sends an emissary to Jesus to ask “are you the one who is to come or are we to await for another”. Waiting can be really challenging. It’s bad enough waiting to meet a friend who is perhaps caught in traffic or delayed for whatever reason. I always start wondering about the time or place we agreed upon. Or perhaps the arrangement was not as certain as I thought. But just imagine if you were locked up with little or no communication. Just imagine the doubts and uncertainties eating away at your psyche. But to John’s question Jesus answers robustly in terms of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have the good news brought to them.” In other words God’s promised redeemed future is taking place in the person and work of Jesus. He is the one who is to come but in ways beyond John’s imagining. Not

that John was wrong. Rather God is always bigger, more wonderful, more creative than we are able or dare to think. That has so much to say to the church today. I really wonder about so many popular evangelists in the mega churches of this land who seem to make God a god of prosperity and success. This seems so far from the God of the Scriptures and of Advent; a God who not only created the world; but demands faithfulness and obedience to his ways; who entered into the world's suffering through his Son on the Cross; and is a God who judges the world with justice and mercy. When John heard of Jesus' response I am sure his heart was warmed as he recognized the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

The reading from James counsels patience to the suffering, beleaguered Christian community. "Be patient therefore beloved until the coming of the Lord." But that community was also in a difficult place where it is easy to lose sight of God's future. The "therefore" at the opening of today's reading links it to what has gone before in chapter 5 which is a denunciation of those who have made their money out of oppression and through deceit. The writer appears to be addressing those who are their victims. To them he offers the examples of the farmer and the prophet who wait in faith and trust. "Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." Don't give up even though you are facing tough times. Don't lose sight of the promises of God; of God's future.

It is this sense of God's rich future, of the "more to come", that is the theme of these readings and of this day. Therefore rejoice. Amen.