

### **First Reading Isaiah 12:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me. <sup>2</sup> Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. <sup>3</sup> With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. <sup>4</sup> And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. <sup>5</sup> Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. <sup>6</sup> Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

### **Second Reading Luke 2:8-15**

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" <sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Great joy! Do you remember your last experience of great joy? For Moses and Susan Bakhsh, great joy was experienced December 4<sup>th</sup> with the birth of their first granddaughter and then again on December 14<sup>th</sup> with the birth of their first grandson! Two new grandbabies in December – great joy! Maybe you experienced great joy as you witnessed the grandeur of God's beautiful creation around you from towering mountains to a beautiful dancing butterfly. Maybe great joy was a reunion of family or the gathering of good friends at Thanksgiving. Maybe you experienced great joy with a promotion or new position or a moment of recognition in your professional life. Joy visits us, yet is it always a result of our circumstances?

Breon Wells writes, "Joy is not so much meant for the good times, as it is for the tumultuous times." And this is the joy that permeates Isaiah 12. The people of God had been through the wringer in the opening chapters of Isaiah. God's people had strayed and turned to others gods. The wickedness of Judah was judged. The City of Jerusalem was declared degenerate. Invading armies decimated the people of God until only a remnant was left. In these dire circumstances we hear Isaiah proclaim, "Give thanks to the Lord, sing praises to the Lord, shout aloud and sing for joy, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel."

Wells continues saying, "This genuine joy does not deny the existence of pain, heartache, and loss." It acknowledges the realities of living under oppressive governments. It acknowledges the realities of innocents being slaughtered at Bethlehem and Sandy Hook. It acknowledges the atrocities of genocides in Germany and Rwanda. It acknowledges the horror of 9/11 and the collateral damage of civilians amidst war. It acknowledges tragic death and devastating illnesses. It acknowledges raging fires and destructive earthquakes and floods. It

acknowledges the struggle to put food on the table and a roof over one's head. It acknowledges that life is not yet as it should be. Not yet as God had imagined for us and for all of creation.

Isaiah 12 describes what will be. It is a "futuring" text. A text that paints a vision of hope for what will be when the peaceable kingdom described in Isaiah 11 takes hold. Genuine joy does not deny the reality of what is; yet genuine joy acknowledges the strength of our God to heal, mend, and restore.

The season of Advent is about the arrival of God with us to heal, mend and restore. The season is about the joy Christ brings to the nations in the midst of their darkest hours. As we just sang, "Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!" We theologically declared that Christ is sovereign, not the horrific things of this world. Christ is sovereign, not the circumstances of our now whatever they maybe. Genuine joy transcends circumstances, because it is anchored in the bedrock we know as God.

Yet, what I found interesting about our Christmas Carol is the very verse that needs to be sung, given the reality of our world is not. I listened to over 30 recordings of "Joy to the World" and not one of them sang the third verse! But, before I delve into the third verse let me unpack the other three.

The first verse implores us to prepare room in our hearts to receive Christ as King. Christ came to rule our hearts, our lives, not with force but with the wonders of his love. And Christ's reign encompasses all of creation, not just humanity, for heaven and nature sings! This verse asks us again and again, "Is there room in our hearts for Christ as King?"

The second verse amplifies the joy experienced when we make room and receive Christ. Men and women sing and so does the natural world. Could it be that fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains sing because humanity has realized our responsibility for the natural world and not just to ourselves? This verse reminds us that we are stewards of this beautiful blue planet entrusted to us.

The final verse sings of the rule of Christ. A rule of truth and grace, not just truth or grace. For truth without grace can lead to self-righteousness or oppressive legalism or worse. Truth in isolation of grace can become a weapon of mass destruction. Grace without truth also goes awry, that is why we join in a prayer of confession every Sunday, for grace without truth leaves us where it finds us.

Whereas, grace with truth or truth with grace transforms us. Grace and truth grants us the wisdom of others, whether human or all of creation. This rule places us, not at the center, but as an integral part of God's plan for the health and wholeness of all creation. We have a responsibility to participate so that all, not just some of creation experiences joy. This is why the third verse should be sung in every rendition of this Christmas Carol.

Listen to the words once again: "No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found, far as, far as, the curse is found."

This third verse is our audacious theological task as people of faith. Where sins, sorrows and thorns infest this world we are to make Christ's blessings flow. Far as the curse of self-aggrandizement is found, where needs of others are not considered, we are to make Christ's blessings flow. We are to make Christ's blessings flow.

Yet, how do we embrace this joy? Let us turn to the shepherds who are tending their sheep. Now shepherds in the Christmas story are often idealized. There is a cozy fire that blazes

among them as they stand watch over the sheep. Yet, given that I have been to Bethlehem and seen the landscape. I don't imagine their sheep watching nights being very comfortable. The ground is hard and relatively barren. I didn't see lush green pastures. I saw hill after hill of scrub brush. Not much fuel to burn let alone food for the sheep to eat. Yet, at night they had to gather the sheep to prevent them from predators. I imagine that these shepherds were covered in dirt and well-seasoned with smells, as they watched their flocks by night. And to these lowly shepherds an angel appeared!

What I love about our story of faith is the unexpected places that God shows up. An angel appears to a young girl named Mary drawing water from a well. An angel appears to shepherds tending someone else's sheep. An angel did appear in the halls of power of the church or state, God chose what we did not expect.

These shepherds were rightly terrified at the presence of an angel. It reminds of the contemporary Christian song "I Can Only Imagine." Surrounded by your glory what will my heart feel...Will I dance or be still, will I stand or fall to my knees, will I sing Hallelujah or not be able to speak at all? Terrified these shepherds let the angel do all the talking. And the angel began with words of assurance, "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid of what is, what your circumstances are, what the circumstances of the world around you are, for I am bringing you good news of great joy!" Then the angel was joined by a multitude of angels who sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace."

I don't know if we can grasp the terror or the exuberant joy of this passage. Yet, we can claim the shepherds' response, for the shepherds acted. "Let us go now!" Not tomorrow. Not when the sun is up. But now! The shepherds received a revelation from the Lord. "Good news of great joy, to you is born the Messiah," said the angel. And so, they roused their slumbering sheep and made their way to Bethlehem immediately.

What about us? Are we still waiting to respond to this good news of great joy? Or maybe we have lost the wonder of this good news of great joy for our lives? Have the circumstances of the world around us or even in your own life overshadowed the truth the angel declared to the shepherds? Is this good news of great joy, which happened over 2,000 years ago just a historical fact for you or does it implication for you NOW?

Isaiah said, "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might." I hear the shepherds saying this as well, "We will trust and not be afraid. We will go NOW." What about us? Will we make Christ's blessings flow NOW with our very lives far as the curse is found?

This Christmas Carol and our texts challenge us this morning to embrace joy. Embrace joy rooted in Christ's capability instead of our present reality. Embrace joy, which comes from the wells of salvation. Embrace joy, as we sing of the truth and grace we have received through Emmanuel, God with us.

Great joy is possible, even in the midst of the world as we know it, for God, good people, is with us NOW. Let's make Christ's blessings flow. Amen.