

Bringer of Joy

I love music of all kinds. On any given day, you might find me opting to listen to “old school” rock and roll, the newest Death Cab for Cutie CD, all kinds of jazz, western swing, bluegrass, the blues, Gregorian chant, opera, show tunes or a Beethoven symphony. Some days you might find me listening to all of them in turn! My interest in some of these forms, at least, is hardly surprising. I grew up in the rock and roll era – I have clear memories of Beatle-mania from my childhood – and my own children have kept me exposed to current trends. My mother and my grandparents on both sides favored music heard on the Grand Ole Opry and mom liked show tunes as well. My dad’s enjoyment of musicians like Al Hirt and Boots Randolph eventually led me to explore more challenging expressions of jazz. But I think my appreciation of classical music came to me more formally, through school field trips and classes. I especially remember a music appreciation class I had in the equivalent of my first grade year in a Church of England primary school. I still recall sitting transfixed, cross-legged on the floor in a large and imposing school hall with a gaggle of my classmates, while a teacher played excerpts from a scratchy old record album for us. The work in question was the suite by Gustav Holst called “The Planets,” and I enjoy it to this day. There are seven movements, one for each of the non-Earth planets known to science in Holst’s day, and they range from the stirring “Mars – The Bringer of War,” to the enchanting “Neptune – The Mystic.” The temporal and thematic centerpiece of the work is “Jupiter – The Bringer of Jollity” or joy.

I thought of that work as I was reading our passage for this morning and putting together the readings and hymns for this morning’s service. It is the third Sunday of the Advent season, traditionally dedicated to an exploration of joy. As part of this exploration, we look to the advent of Christ Jesus, his advent as a babe in Bethlehem, his coming again at the end of the age, and his daily coming into our hearts as a cause to us for joy, great joy. But even as we consider what the joy of Advent means in our lives, we should also stop to ponder what the joy of anticipation of God’s coming meant for the Chosen People of God in the time of Isaiah. And we must also ask ourselves, “Who are the ones who are praying most avidly today for a new advent? How do they conceive of joy in the Day of the Lord?”

Our Scripture this morning comes from the section of the Book of Isaiah that many scholars believe was written in the days after the Babylonian Captivity. What was left of the once proud Nation of Israel was now a client-state of Persia, reduced by wars and exile to a remnant of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi. Their dreams of a return to glory have subsided as they have struggled to build a new Temple from the ruins of the old, to restore a semblance of security to Jerusalem with a new wall and to eke a meager living from once-fertile fields now given over to thorns and weeds. They are hungry, frightened and depressed; fighting off bandits who would steal what little they have, faced with hostility from the descendants of those left behind in the Exile, and still dominated by a foreign, if generally benign, regime. They were, in other words, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captive. What they wanted was for God to put things to rights -- to show the world that the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Leah and Rachel, was the One True God and that they, the Children of Israel, were God’s Own People. They looked for Yahweh to be the Bringer of their joy.

What would that look like, the vindication they so craved? They would be healed, of course, free and happy. The Temple and the city would be brought back to their former glory. No longer would they be slaves but people from around the world would come willingly to serve Israel and

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Israel's God. They themselves would be able to devote their time to prayer and praise, to conducting the purifying sacrifices on behalf of all people. Like their fictional descendent, Tevye of "Fiddler on the Roof," they would "discuss the holy books... several hours every day. That would be the sweetest thing of all." Their joy would be like that of a bride and a bridegroom on their wedding day. They looked to Yahweh to be the bringer of their joy.

Scott Hoezee, a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church and Director of the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, offers some contemporary examples, from real life and literature, of just what the anticipated joy of the Jews to whom Isaiah spoke looks like when it is realized. "This is Nelson Mandela emerging from his jail cell after so many years of unjust incarceration," he writes, "and walking out into the sunlight of a new day dawning. This is the rollback of injustice and of oppression as the once-imprisoned man takes the oath of office as president of the very nation that had locked him away for 27 long, and seemingly never-to-end, years. This is exuberant crowds of disbelief standing atop the Berlin Wall and taking whacks at it with sledgehammers as the old order of things was swept away. This is East German families streaming through the cracks in the walls to embrace loved ones who for decades had lived both three miles away and a million miles away on the other side of the wall. This is tears of wonder. This is Frodo Baggins awakening in a sunlit room only to see Gandalf—whom he was sure had died—standing watch over his bed and letting loose with a laugh so contagious it soon swept up everyone in the vicinity. This is Frodo asking the loaded and eschatologically joyful question, "Does this mean that everything bad that has ever happened is going to be unmade." This is God's "Yes" to such a question." This is, in the words of Isaiah, the year of the Lord's favor.

As some of you may remember, from our study of Luke chapter four and Jesus' use of these words from Isaiah, "the year of the Lord's favor" is a kind of code. It is a reference to the Year of Jubilee, that ultimate celebration of Sabbath that was mandated by Leviticus to be observed every fifty years. The Year of Jubilee was to be like the ordinary Sabbath Year, celebrated every seventh year, in that cultivated land was to be allowed to lie fallow and restore itself. All outstanding debts were to be cancelled in a Sabbath or Jubilee year and all Hebrew slaves were to be freed. But the Year of Jubilee goes one step further in its restoration of economic equality. In the Year of Jubilee, all land that had been sold during the previous 49 years was to be restored to the family who had sold it. As Robert Linthicum writes, "Simply put, jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune! It was Israel's most radical vehicle to redistribute its wealth so that society could be rebalanced and neither wealth nor political power could accumulate in the hands of a self-selected few." First Isaiah and later Jesus, in his quotation of the prophet, see this economic and political rebalancing of the scales as integral to their vision of the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community which will bring joy to all people. Our God is the bringer of joy.

If we are to look at this passage with integrity, then we must consider not only the import of the promise of "the year of the Lord's favor," but also the words that follow, "the day of vengeance of our God." As Luke remembers it, Jesus left this phrase out when he quoted from Isaiah. It is certainly a word that falls hard on our ears as we focus on the love of God for all humankind and Jesus' offer of redemption for all. Some modern scholars have sought to ameliorate the seeming harshness of the phrase. Episcopal scholar Chris Haslam points to a footnote in the New Oxford Annotated Bible, which says that rescue is a better translation of the Hebrew than vengeance,

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and also to an article in the New Jerome Bible Commentary, which offers vindication as an alternate translation. Ralph Klein of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago writes, “The “vengeance” of our God is a mistranslation. It means rather that God will exercise his imperial rule *on behalf of his people.*” I checked with our resident Hebrew scholar and Pam Scalise told me that the word essentially means “the right side wins.” Isaiah and his audience were looking for the day in which God would restore the right order of things, a day in which, of course, Israel would come out on top. But even if we accept a “kinder, gentler” substitute for vengeance in this passage, we must acknowledge the reality that even God’s people can anticipate punishment of their enemies with joy. We must never forget that the vast majority of our Bible was written to people under persecution, to the oppressed, and that most people who are oppressed see taking arms against their oppressors as a holy calling. Remember the words of Psalm 137, which begins with a lament by the rivers of Babylon, where “we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion,” and ends with a shriek against Babylon the Devastator, “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!”

This past week, in my personal reading, I came across a poem by Martín Espada, a Brooklyn native of Puerto Rican heritage who has been a tenant lawyer and legal services supervisor in addition to his current post of Professor of poetry and creative writing at the University of Massachusetts. The title poem from his award-winning collection, Imagine the Angels of Bread, it strikes me in some ways as a contemporary rendering of this passage from Isaiah, displaying the delicate balance between the joy of liberation and the temptation of vengeance in an imagined Year of the Lord’s Favor:

This is the year that squatters evict landlords,
gazing like admirals from the rail
of the roofdeck
or levitating hands in praise
of steam in the shower;
this is the year
that shawled refugees deport judges
who stare at the floor
and their swollen feet
as files are stamped
with their destination;
this is the year that police revolvers,
stove-hot, blister the fingers
of raging cops,
and nightsticks splinter
in their palms;
this is the year
that darkskinned men
lynched a century ago
return to sip coffee quietly
with the apologizing descendants
of their executioners.

This is the year that those

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who swim the border's undertow
and shiver in boxcars
are greeted with trumpets and drums
at the first railroad crossing
on the other side;
this is the year that the hands
pulling tomatoes from the vine
uproot the deed to the earth that sprouts the vine,
the hands canning tomatoes
are named in the will
that owns the bedlam of the cannery;
this is the year that the eyes
stinging from the poison that purifies toilets
awaken at last to the sight
of a rooster-loud hillside,
pilgrimage of immigrant birth;
this is the year that cockroaches
become extinct, that no doctor
finds a roach embedded
in the ear of an infant;
this is the year that the food stamps
of adolescent mothers
are auctioned like gold doubloons,
and no coin is given to buy machetes
for the next bouquet of severed heads
in coffee plantation country.

If the abolition of slave-manacles
began as a vision of hands without manacles,
then this is the year;
if the shutdown of extermination camps
began as imagination of a land
without barbed wire or the crematorium,
then this is the year;
if every rebellion begins with the idea
that conquerors on horseback
are not many-legged gods, that they too drown
if plunged in the river,
then this is the year.

So may every humiliated mouth,
teeth like desecrated headstones,
fill with the angels of bread.

The very normal human tendency to cloak justifiable rage against oppression with the imagined mantle of God's permission for vengeance is what brings us to tragedies like the finally-waning

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Troubles of Northern Ireland, to the centuries-old back and forth of violence in the Holy Land, even to the universally decried slaughter of 9/11. That common human tendency is what makes men like Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Nelson Mandela so rare – men who can turn to those who imprisoned them, to those who denied basic human rights to their people, with a word of forgiveness and reconciliation, men who call on their fellows to eschew the justice of the sword. But of course, that is a way of justice with peace that all three learned from Jesus, who said “Father, forgive them,” about those who nailed him on the cross.

That same Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, took these words of Isaiah as his own mission statement, to bring good news to the oppressed. After his death and resurrection, he charged his disciples to take that same good news to the very ends of the earth. Like Isaiah, he had a vision of the good news of the love and joy of God sweeping through all the earth, beginning with those to whom the Good News had already been delivered. As the spiritual heirs of those disciples, it is our task now to bring good news to the oppressed. We must bring them the good news of a new life through Christ Jesus, the good news of the unfailing love of God and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, but we must also bring them the good news of political freedom, the good news of economic justice, the good news of the angels of bread. We can do this through personal witness – all of us, after all, can tell the story of our own lives and how the love of God has renewed our joy. We can do this with our finances, giving from our relative abundance to those whose poverty is profound. We can do this through our words of influence – all of us have access to local officials who help decide the fate of mobile home parks and social service programs, all of us can call or write to our state legislators and congressmen who can impact even larger efforts to free captives of economic or political chains. We even have a President-elect who is asking for citizen input on various issues on his website, change.gov, and apparently heeding what is written there. Now, Senator Obama says he is a follower of Jesus and I believe him but I also believe he is a politician who will listen most to the loudest voices in the country. So let the voices of the Year of the Lord’s Favor speak the loudest. Let freedom ring! Let us join together to call on our leaders to make our nation and our world a place where justice flows down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream!

Why should we think of these things on this day? Because our joy depends on them. As we follow Christ, the one who is the source and bringer of our joy, we are called, in the familiar words of Paul, to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus, who said that he came not to be served, but to serve. We, too, are called to service, “for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.” I would add to those words of Francis, it is in bringing joy that we will find joy. So let us prepare to move out, in this joyful week of advent, to touch in any way we can the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captive, with words and deeds of good news, of comfort, of release. For as the joy and love of Jesus enters our trembling hearts, as we take up the work God has given us to be part of the new creation, so shall we truly experience a foretaste of the Year of the Lord’s Favor, the promised Jubilee, when joy shall fill all the Earth. Amen.