

Peace on Earth: Experiencing Joy  
 Isaiah 35:1-10  
 Matthew 11:2-11  
 Third Sunday of Advent  
 December 12, 2010  
 Rev. Heather Leslie Hammer

I knew I would be preaching on joy today, so I've been looking for joy all week. I certainly haven't found much joy in the newspaper. Instead, I found the sad details of the crash when a little two-year-old died on our street last week. In the news I found the death of John Edward's wife, Elizabeth Edwards, and the rehash of her husband's infidelity. I found statistics that only 70% of California's high school students graduate —said the other way, it's quite depressing: 30% do not finish high school. I read that a Taliban suicide bomber killed NATO service members and local shopkeepers in Afghanistan. And I found in the news a reminder of Pearl Harbor on the anniversary of that attack. I guess there was some good news in that there was a 5 million dollar settlement against a chewing tobacco company for causing death by mouth cancer—but I can't say that that made me exactly joyful. The only news item of joy was the celebration of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights in honor of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem.

What *did* make me joyful, were things that didn't make the news—the generosity of folks—that two men took a half day moving furniture for me and delivered to my office a double bookcase and desk from the Golden Gate District office in San Francisco that is closing down. What did make me joyful was the United Methodist Women's Christmas dinner on Wednesday and how so many people helped make the event so special, inviting guests and planning a festive party. And of course, what brought me ultimate joy, was our daughter Leslie coming home for Christmas from Kansas City and Guatemala. In the routine of life, these joys stand out. Sometimes it follows a time of loss or loneliness, a time of grief or tragedy. After a time of waiting. Or it may just sprout up and bloom, like a surprising gift in the otherwise desert of life.

"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" (Is. 35:1). This is joyful poetry! The Bible contains many different kinds of writing. Some parts are history, but this part in the Book of Isaiah certainly isn't history as we think of history today. For one thing, it's written in the future tense ("the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad..."), and history is always in the past tense. This writing is supposed to be the vision of a prophet, but we are not even sure who the prophet was historically, because there was more than one man who wrote the verses in the Book of Isaiah. Scholars generally speak of first and second and third Isaiah.

This is poetry!—with poetic forms, like personification: "the desert...shall blossom...and rejoice with joy and singing." Of course, deserts don't sing, literally. But in metaphorical language, a desert can certainly sing, or even dance! And we know what the writer means because sometimes we have experienced joy, and we've had trouble putting it down in words. Joy is too alive to be recorded in a dry report of history!

The Prophet Isaiah is *feeling* something very joyful, very hopeful. This poetry is *heart* language, not *head* language.

Of course, we can use the *head* to understand the context in which the poetry of the Book of Isaiah was written. My Old Testament professor made a big point that Isaiah is not a Christian text. We know it's in the Old Testament, but we always read Isaiah in Advent in the Revised Common Lectionary readings for December, and so we think of Isaiah predicting the coming of Christ. But the historical setting of the writing of Isaiah was the Exile, 500 some years before Christ. The Exile was the time when the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, and many of the Israelites were forced to move to Babylon. There they grieved the loss of the Temple and their native language and culture. (The destruction of the Temple has been called an ancient "9-11." After the attack, everything changed.) In order to preserve their religious oral traditions, the people wrote them down. This is the time from which we get much of the Old Testament, or we can call it the Hebrew Bible, because for the Hebrew people, this was, and for Jews today this is, their Bible.

The passage we heard today talks about "a highway" for God's people, "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing" (35:8-10). Academics generally agree that the writer here is talking about a return of the Israelite people to Jerusalem out of Exile in Babylon. This was their hope: that God's people would march home to Jerusalem on a highway—it certainly wasn't a highway like our very own 101, and maybe it wasn't even ever intended to be thought of as a real road. Maybe it was a spiritual path, a poetic image of return and restoration.

Thanks to the composer, Frederick Händel, Christians have this text from Isaiah all tied up with Baby Jesus. If Isaiah is about the ancient Israelites' return from captivity, why is Händel's *Messiah* always sung at Christmas? The tenor soloist sings, "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem...The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God," and we think he's singing about Jesus coming! But this text wasn't historically about Jesus at all.

But what has happened here is what happens so often when we read the Bible. Theologians (and people like Händel) have identified the Isaiah passage with Jesus, not because it is any historical account of his coming, but because it is a poetic description of God's saving power. And God's saving power is all through the Bible! And it is especially evident in the return from Exile and in the coming of Christ, the Savior.

So the Book of Isaiah is poetry that takes the reader through stages of human emotion: loss, grief, and hope. (It's the stuff of all poetry.) This pattern of movement repeats itself in the Bible. It is similar to the pattern of movement from death, to grief, to resurrection at the end of Jesus' life (Good Friday with death, Saturday with mourning, and Sunday with the hope of new life). And once the early followers of Jesus experienced the joy of resurrection and recognized the power of the risen Christ as hope for the world, they told the good news of the story of Jesus' whole life, and in Matthew, they told about Jesus' birth, the coming of the Christ Child, or what we call Advent. And the Advent story uses this same three-stage

movement, from loss, to grief, to hope: a broken world, sadness and a period of waiting, and then a reason to hope again! The people, living in poverty and in political turmoil under the Roman rule, longed for a Messiah and asked, "Are you the one who is to come?" (Mt. 11:2). And rather than answer directly, Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven that would bring a new hope to the world.

This brings us to the mystery of Jesus' birth. Kids always have the best ways of understanding things.

A Sunday school class, the week before Christmas, started with prayer. One child prayed aloud, "Lord, if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it, I'm having a real good time like I am."

Then they said the Lord's Prayer, and the youngest in the class led the prayer: "Our Father, who does art in heaven, Harold is His name. Amen."

Then the lesson started and the Sunday school teacher asked her class, "What was Jesus' mother's name?"

One child answered, "Mary."

Then the teacher asked, "Who knows what Jesus' father's name was?"

A little kid said, "Verge."

Confused the teacher asked, "Where did you get that?"

The child said, "Well, you know, they are always talking about Verge n' Mary."

Who is this "Virgin Mary" they're always talking about, anyway? Now, my purpose is not to upset any Catholics we might have among us, or people who choose to read the Bible very literally. But today I'd like to suggest that "Virgin Mary" just might be a mistranslation or a phrase of poetic license. Biblical scholars say that the Hebrew word in Isaiah means "a young woman" who would conceive and bear a son, not a "virgin," but "young woman" was translated into the Greek as "virgin" (Is. 7:14). Then the tradition spread of a birth by a woman who had not lain with her betrothed. The "virgin conception," that is, conception by the Holy Spirit, became standard Christian belief by the second century. It wasn't part of the original Hebrew text.

It is very possible that Mary's pregnancy was surprising—as pregnancy often is. And we also believe it was very joyful—as pregnancy often is, usually, we hope. The writer of Matthew wanted to capture the joy of this amazing birth, and the word he used was the Greek word for "virgin." (See John Shelby Spong:

<http://www.beliefnet.com/Entertainment/Movies/The-Nativity-Story/A-Religious-Santa-Claus-Tale.aspx>).

And through the ages, people interpreted the wording in different ways, some literally and some more poetically. Sometimes, what was perhaps meant to be poetry, ended up being taken by many as historical truth. The Doctrine of Perpetual Virginity is an example. (The Catholic Church has a complicated way of explaining that Mary was always a virgin even when she later gave birth to Jesus' brothers and sisters.) It's fine if you want to believe this,

but in our church we allow you to use your heart, your head, and your tradition to understand the Bible, which means you might use *your heart* and just like the sound of the poetry in Isaiah and in the birth narratives of Jesus and believe that the poetry conveys amazing joy; or you might want to use *your head* and make logical sense out of the Bible and reject the idea that the writing is scientific or historical; your contemporary logic says it couldn't be. Some people will want to stay with the beliefs they grew up with: most of us grew up with the idea that Isaiah predicts the coming of Christ and that Christ was born of a virgin mother. Use your heart, use your head, and use your tradition. You have some choices how you understand this.

But no matter how you understand the Bible and the traditions of our faith, you can experience the joy of belief in a God who carries us out of captivity back to life in community. You can experience the joy of belief in a Savior whose birth brings comfort and hope, and, yes, joy, joy enough to compose and perform amazing music that we love to hear each year. You can experience the joy of this church when we practice joy—every week in our prayer time, in our fellowship time, and in our acts of kindness throughout the week. You can look at your own life through the lens of joy—and appreciate what you have and be hopeful about tomorrow. You can demonstrate joy in your conversations with others: you can listen to someone who needs a friend and experience the joy of knowing you are helping someone. You can tell people about the joy you feel here at St. John's.

This is what it means to be the emancipators: to give the blind their sight, to allow the lame to walk, to see that the lepers are cleansed, that the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them! In fact, people who experience joy will set the desert to singing! How else can you put it, but in poetry? "Sorrow and sighing shall flee away." "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given!" (Is. 9:6). "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel."