Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

December 13, 2020

*“More Than a Poem”*

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Like last Sunday, we are again moving forward on our Advent journey with the words of the prophet, Isaiah. Last week, Isaiah was encouraging the people in captivity to open their arms to receive comfort from their God. He was telling them that the earlier divine attitude of disappointment and anger had dissipated to nothing. Instead, God’s manner and demeanor toward them was shinning with comfort and blessing for them.

So, now, in this passage, Isaiah is sharing more of God’s good news with them. He is inviting them to look back toward home, back to Jerusalem. Apparently, part of God’s desire and blessing is that they live in their own land, in freedom. So, in this passage, Isaiah is urging them to return to Jerusalem, to return home …

Well, here in chapter sixty-one, some of them *have* returned home. Despite the fact that most of them would not have been alive when Jerusalem fell and many of the people were carried off to Babylon, some brave people have probably inspired by the stories of their parents, and their grandparents who died in Babylon, some of these people have gone back.

Some may have been moved to pull-up stakes and make the journey back encouraged by the thought of living in their own land, and the freedom and independence that this has offered.

Unfortunately, their homecoming was not everything they thought it was going to be. Indeed, it was not everything they had hoped it was going to be.

What the returning Israelites found was a city in ruins. The Babylonians had left little untouched by violence. What had been left standing was now home to overgrown vegetation, unchecked vermin, and a few stragglers who had managed to claw-out a subsistence living in the shell of what once had been a beautiful and bustling city.

The ravages of time and decay—this is what the returnees encountered. They must have thought it a cruel joke to be confronted by such a mess. All the memories they had kept alive were rubble, and all their hopes must have seemed like foolish fantasy.

It was to them God sent this poem of hope.

When confronted by the disappointment and destruction faced by those returning refuges so long ago, I cannot help but think that they, like most of us, would probably have wanted something a bit more than a poem. For us, this is especially true this year isn’t it?

Of course, this week’s poem, like last week’s, is beautiful in what it says, and what it promises. It’s just that: the problems we face often seem so overwhelming and dangerous.

I will not recite the current numbers of infections and deaths our country—and the whole world—has suffered this year. By the time you see this video, the numbers would have changed anyway. I choose not to repeat them because the numbers are readily available. More importantly: numbers do not do justice to the human lives they represent, nor the feelings of dislocation, and distress that many of us are experiencing every day.

Yet, on this Third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday wherein we acknowledge *Joy* as the prevailing character of the day, I *do* want us to think about, and experience *Joy*. I believe *God* deeply and dearly wants this for us, too.

I can believe this because I know that Advent is all about *Joy*. It’s about anticipation. It’s waiting and wondering what is going to happen next—what surprise, what marvel, what secret is going to be revealed on Christmas morning?

Advent and Christmas: a time when we wait for God to bring something new and good into the world. It is a celebration of possibility—that is what an *infant* is—a baby is living and breathing potential; Living and breathing possibility.

And so, I sincerely pray that we will all hold close that sense of potential and hope that God offers us throughout Advent, and especially in the poem Isaiah brought us to in today’s lesson.

However, I also want to acknowledge and hold up our call to contemplate and receive joy beside the reality of the moment—and the real feelings and situations—that we are living with.

For example, I want us to acknowledge and accept:

* the reports of overwhelmed hospitals and exhausted medical professionals;
* the many families grieving the loss of loved ones, or tending to and praying for those who are sick;
* the many families who do not fear not having a festive Christmas, but instead fear they may not be able to feed their children and themselves;
* the desperation and fear of many who have lost their jobs, or their businesses, and the many who may lose or have lost their homes;

I also want to acknowledge that there are many of us are having moments (if not longer) of deep anxiety and grief related to other problems. Some of us may be living through this time of year without the loved ones we who were beside us last year. I want us to acknowledge and accept the feelings of loss and their disorienting, trying, even frustrating effects on us, or our neighbors.

I want us to do all of this because I want us to know the deep and profound truth about God: (which is) that God knows all of these things about us; knows all of our fears and anguish and is here even now with us, and is coming to us again in a manger in Bethlehem. This is what God does. This is who God is. Ours is the God who promises our release from all fears and suffering and our captivity to them, and proclaims, instead, our blessedness in God’s sight.

Another writer has expressed these thoughts in this way:

*What a gift, then, to be reminded by Isaiah that the Messiah will not come to congratulate the happy couples, or high-five the winners, or bend an elbow with the successful. God will come to walk with the widow, to comfort the lost, and to take to his knees with the oppressed. Mark this. The prophet promises release, liberty, comfort, rebuilding, binding up of the brokenhearted, and restoration of what has been lost. This is the good news.*

[Martha Spong, *The Christian Century,12/15/17*]

It has been a difficult year, and it is not over yet. Allow yourself to feel everything you are feeling and do not hold back because our God’s shoulders are broad indeed. I pray that you will do this and release your fears and sorrows into God’s care instead of hold them back, release them into god’s care, so that you may face the future with a peaceful heart, a hope-filled spirit, and the deep joy of Christ. May this be so. Amen.