What a Joy!

Third Sunday in Advent 2019

Isaiah 35:1-10

*And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.*

*Isaiah 35:10*

This beautiful vision of the prophet Isaiah continues our journey through Advent. The lectionary preparers place this vision of God’s coming reign following last week’s reading, which was a description of a time when natural and historical enemies will lay aside their hatreds and struggles and live together in harmony.

Between the vision in Isaiah 11, last week’s reading, and Isaiah 35, this week’s, there is a lot of doom, desolation, and judgment. Example: *Edom’s streams will be turned into pitch, its dust into Sulphur, and its land will become burning pitch. [Isaiah 34:9]* This is typical of what one find’s in the intervening chapters.

Then appears the reading for today. Today’s reading continues the theme in Isaiah 11 from last week. It’s a vision of a time to come in God’s future when that which challenges us in the present will be no more: when those with physical challenges will be able to transcend their disabilities; when the hot, dry desert, full of beiges and browns, will become green with new growth and life.

Isaiah 35 occurs in a strange place in the book. We think the Book of Isaiah, and we think it is a book like other books we read. Authors write books to be read one chapter after another. Not the Bible. Isaiah probably wrote what he did over time, in different, discrete manuscripts. Later on, people recovered his writings and assembled them according to their inclinations and for their reasons. But for us readers, if you read one chapter after another, it seems as if the editors made some bad decisions in placing this chapter where it is. Before this chapter, Isaiah is giving it to us left and right. Judgment against Israel, natural enemies at each other’s throats, chaos, and the natural world at its worst. It’s pretty gloomy, if you catch my drift. In writing chapter 35, it’s as if the writer couldn’t wait to get to the good stuff, just as many children cannot wait to get to the Christmas carols and the opening of presents.

And so Isaiah 35. It almost seems as if Isaiah emerges from a really bad, dark place and finds himself in the bright sun of energy and hope. You remember the story I shared last week about Professor Lundblad and the recently widowed man who one day came out of his dark place.

But, you know, like most of life, it’s a bit more complicated than that. It is not that one day, Isaiah finds himself in a totally different space. Maybe it’s that, even amidst, all the darkness in the world, Isaiah was able to find the glimmer of light.

I want to play one of my favorite songs of the season for you. It is not overtly Christian or even religious, but it sings more eloquently what I am trying to say than my words. Many of you will recognize it:

***Play Silent Night/7:00 News***

This is Simon and Garfunkel singing in the 1960s. They sing of the cognitive dissonance they felt one Christmas, singing the haunting beauty of that favorite Christmas carol amidst all the turbulence, violence, and unrest of the time. It resonates with us, forty something years later, for the human condition has not changed much.

Isaiah’s words challenge us to speak a hopeful word in our troubling times. Isaiah dares to speak a word out of place. A word that refused to wait until things improved. As Walter Bruggemann has reminded us, “Israel’s doxologies are characteristically against the data.” We see and hear the data every night on the news and every morning on the front page of the paper. Add to that the data of our own lives: waiting for the test results from the doctor, mourning the death of a loved one, wondering if we’ll make it through the next round of lay-offs. We know the data all too well and we long for a word out of place.

Who will speak a word out of place? Marian Wright Edelman, founder and president of the Children’s Defense Fund often speaks such a word. She refuses to wait until the time is right and everyone is on her side. After the latest defeat of a gun control measure, she wrote: “I woke up the morning after the Senate vote thinking about Sojourner Truth, one of my role models, a brilliant and indomitable slave woman who could neither read nor write but who was passionate about ending unjust slavery and second-class treatment of women. At the end of one of her antislavery talks in Ohio, a man came up to her and said, “Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Do you suppose people care what you say? Why, I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea.”

“Perhaps not,” she answered, “but, the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching.”

Then Marian goes on in her own words: “We must be determined and persistent fleas…Enough fleas biting strategically can make the biggest dog uncomfortable.  And if they flick some of us off but even more of us keep coming back with our calls, emails, visits, nonviolent direct action protests, and votes -- we’ll win.”

Who will speak a word out of place? An advocate for children who refuses to be silent. A prophet who couldn’t wait until the hopeful Part 2 of Isaiah 40-55. He spoke a word out of place. This is exactly the word many people are yearning to hear. It is the word, you people of Nu’uanu Congregational Church, that God is challenging you to speak, not just from the pulpit, but in your daily conversations, at Starbucks, or Zippy’s, on the golf course and tennis courts, at the hospital bed. We may not speak with presidential or congressional authority and influence, but like the flea, we can do our part.