

THE JOY OF ADVENT

Advent 3 Year A

Is. 35:1-10; Ps. 146:5-10; Jas. 5:7-10; Mt. 11:2-11

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As I was coming to the end of my time at Trinity Theological College, just before I was appointed to my first congregations, I can remember reflecting over the previous eight years or so, over which period of time I spent in what was often happy, but was also at times quite “anguished” study at Trinity College and other theological institutions as well. The first year of study was the worst, as I painfully adjusted to college requirements and study patterns that would get me through my various tasks and assignments. I was reminded at that time, of those first few lines in Dickens' novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, which read:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness. It was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way...¹

Little did I realise at the beginning, that I would still be studying eight years later. Even less did I imagine that I would end up a Uniting Church minister—I wasn't even a *member* of the Uniting Church at that particular time—although I had been some years previously. But as I looked back, I also looked forward with a not inconsiderable amount of joy and hopeful expectation. I was reminded of the words of an old hymn, which was also a kind of catch-cry for Martin Luther King, which went:

I'm free at last. I'm free at last.

Praise God Almighty, I'm free at last.

Such was the joy I felt. The future looked good—and it has been good—well mostly. It seems, however, that it doesn't matter how well you plan, or how much you anticipate a particular kind of future for yourself, the end product can sometimes be very different to what you expect. Sometimes joyfully different—such as what I was experiencing—sometimes painfully different—such as for those people who joyfully and expectantly wait for a new baby—only to find that something has gone wrong with the pregnancy. Each of us at various times have experienced times of great joy and times of bitter disappointment.

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, (London: Penguin, 1985) 35

Perhaps this was the way John the baptist was feeling—imprisoned for speaking out against Herod’s morally questionable marriage arrangements. Here was the man who had prophesied the immanent coming of the Messiah—the one who had come to prepare the way for Jesus by calling people to repentance. And perhaps he was thinking things like: “What’s happened? What’s gone wrong? Has Jesus forgotten his friend and relative? Didn’t Isaiah foretell, among other things, release for the captives? Is this the way it’s going to end? What of the future? My whole life was spent preparing the way for the Messiah. Has my work finished? Have I done all that has been required of me? This is *not* what I expected!”

As Isaiah wrote the words of Chapter 35 of the book of Isaiah, you can imagine the pure joy of expectation that *he* must have experienced at the revelation that God would at some future time break into the history of humanity and bring in a world of peace and harmony—a world that is fertile—a world in which fear is absent—a world in which healing will take place—a world in which all will know and experience peace and great joy. Like the joy of expectation that I was experiencing close to my time of exiting the student life. Like the joy experienced at the impending birth of a baby. But things don’t always turn out the way you expect—and this can sometimes cause bitterness and doubt.

Sometimes our lives can be a little bit like a mirage. A mirage, as you all know, is just an illusion caused by the reflection of the sun on the desert, creating heat waves on the parched ground. Throughout our lives we try to focus on those things that we want—those things that will quench our spiritual thirst and bring us spiritual satisfaction, only to find that the pool of water dries up when we approach it. The result is an overwhelming emptiness. We look for reality only to find an illusion. Joy is replaced by bitterness and disappointment.

The good news of Advent is that the *real* thing is coming into our lives, sent by God, in a special way, beginning with the birth of Jesus. It’s no illusion. And we’re reminded at this time, of the wonderful promise that comes through the words of Isaiah, in the proclamation that “*Here is your God...*” It’s the same promise for us with the coming of Christ at Christmas time. It’s the good news of Advent. Here again is this promise from the pen of Isaiah:

*⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
⁶ then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,
and streams in the desert;*

*7 the burning sand shall become a pool,
and the thirsty ground springs of water;
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.*

John would have been very familiar with this passage, but at this moment he was experiencing little joy at the knowledge of Christ's coming. And so John sends his disciples to Jesus: "Are you the One or should we look for another?"

And Jesus replies to John's disciples, "Go and tell John what you hear and see." Look at the evidence, see for yourself. And he pointed to the signs that John would have known from scripture:

5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Mt. 11:5)

People ask the same question today—in the things they say and in the way they act. Is Jesus the one? Does he truly reveal the nature of God and represent God, indeed is he truly God in human life? Is his coming the beginning of a new age, of the Kingdom of God? Is he the chosen one, the anointed one, the Messiah?

The answer Jesus himself gave to John was "Look and see!" Here are the signs of new life breaking into a world of death and corruption—the victory promised in the coming of the Kingdom with the Messiah is now beginning to be enjoyed. Jesus did not point to his own credentials. Rather he said—and still says to us: "Look and see—look around you—look at the ways in which God is breaking into your every day—the proof is around you. If you have eyes to see—look!"

In relation to this, one commentator affirms—perhaps with his tongue in his cheek—that all parents will get into heaven. He reminds us that there is only one place in the entire gospel where Jesus gives the criteria of who gets to heaven. It's in Matthew 25.

"When I was hungry you gave me to eat, when I was thirsty you gave me to drink, when I was ill you visited me, and so on. As long as you did it to one of the least of my brethren you did it to me. Enter into the joy of the Lord."

This commentator states that these works of mercy are built into family life by nature. You can't escape them: "Mom, what'll I wear?"—counseling the doubtful. "Dad, will you help me with my maths homework?"—instructing the ignorant. The 2:00 a.m. bottle—giving drink to the thirsty. Changing nappies—clothing the naked. Preparing meals—

feeding the hungry. The cat died—burying the dead. (And this is the one I like) “Are you still in the bathroom?”—visiting the imprisoned.

The point is, these works of mercy—these signs that herald the Kingdom of God are all around us. These things go on all the time. We so often focus on the negative and miss the positive revelation of the kingdom of God that is here now, all around us. In spite of evil and suffering in the world, goodness abounds. Love is given and received. People are faithful. Caring, courtesy, and good deeds are commonplace.

But Jesus is not just pointing to physical freedom and physical healing. These miracles have a much wider implication—they can be seen as “signs” of an inner transformation. What does it profit a person ultimately to receive the use of physical eyes and feet if they continue to be spiritually blind and lame? No. The vital signs of God’s presence are spiritual—spiritual enlightenment (blind see, deaf hear) and empowerment (lame walk, dead raised).

Not everyone wins the battle with sickness. Some who are blind may never see; the deaf may have to continue with their silent existence. Those with physical challenges may continue to be lame and those who are mute may continue in their silence. But we know that it is God’s will that all people experience wholeness and healing in their lives. Christ’s coming to us at Christmas is a time for hope for those who feel hopeless, and a time for healing for all who are hurting. And so it is a time of Joy—a time for rejoicing in the coming of Christ into the world.

It means that there is hope for those who feel they have not hope. It means that there is healing for our troubled spirits. It means intense joy as we celebrate what Christ does in our lives. Is Jesus the One? Just look around you—and rejoice in the Christ of our salvation.

Let us have hope, healing and joy in the Advent message: *“Be Strong, do not fear! Here is your God!”* God is here in Christ to save you. God has touched the ears of the deaf. God has spat into the dust and anointed the eyes of the blind. And God continues to reach out to us through Christ—to touch us in our pain and in our brokenness. God continues to reach out to us in this time of celebration of Christ’s coming. During this, our third Sunday of Advent, we have lit the candle of joy. As we take to heart the Prophet’s message of hope, healing and joy, may our joy in Christ our Lord be complete.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.