

“REJOICE IN HOPE”
Isaiah 25:1-9; Romans 12:8-18
December 3, 2017
Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

“Rejoice” became our Advent theme as our conversations around our worship theme for this year, which is “Renewal,” led us to explore a whole bunch more “re-“ words. Now, “rejoice” doesn’t *seem* to be exactly the same sort of re- word as, say, recommitment or rebuild or reform. It doesn’t mean “joy again” ... or does it?

Don’t we sometime wish we *could* “joyce” again, that we could somehow recover a sense of joy that has been lost or forgotten or submerged in the “stuff” of life? You know what I’m talking about: all those things that have us too preoccupied to stand still in wonder at a sunset, too tense to be fully in the moment of laughter with a loved one, too full of worry to celebrate good news, too busy to play, too burdened to rest. It’s not the same stuff for all of us – it might be too many medical appointments or a heavy work load or loneliness or boredom or relationship issues or just the sameness of an unfulfilling routine. It might be a feeling of hopelessness in the face of our hostile and morally bankrupt culture or the suffering and injustice in our world. But we know that feeling of having somehow lost the connection with joy.

Maybe that *is* what those Bible verse are talking about when they urge us to “rejoice.”

Maybe that’s what this season of Advent is for ... returning to joy, or perhaps coming home to it for the first time.

We know, right off the bat, that this is a difficult case to make; we can identify the obstacles and objections. The holiday season is hard for many people. When somebody is sick, in grief or depression, struggling with poverty, or burdened by life, the very idea of joy seems impossible at best. To talk about joy might seem insensitive or ignorant of the realities many of those around us have to live with. I know, as a relatively privileged person, I need to be careful about that.

But I also know that the scriptures repeatedly urge us to rejoice. I know that the joy we read about there is rooted in something deeper than the painful realities that come with being human. And I don’t believe that God put us on this earth to just put our heads down and slog our way through life until we die. I believe in a God who intends better things for us.

So it occurs to me that this may be one reason we have holidays – or *holy days* – as they were originally known: to call us out of our routine, our worries, our struggles and striving; to give us these seasons for celebrating life as God’s gift; to bring us back to an awareness of light in our darkness; to recall us to joy.

It’s not about the expectations, whatever those might be in any of our different lives. It’s not about the shopping or the presents or the decorations or the activities – any of which can be a hindrance or a help, depending. It’s not even about the music or the church services or the mission projects that allow us to experience what we refer to as “the joy of giving.” A holy season like Advent is above all an opportunity and invitation to find our way back toward the joy of belonging to Christ.

As I said, the scriptures recall us to that joy, and the scriptures we read today speak in particular to that tricky relationship between joy and hope.

Isaiah 25 starts out with expressions of joy and praise: “I will exalt you, I will praise your name, for you have done wonderful things ...” But pretty quickly we get to this: “You have made the city a heap, the fortified city a ruin....”

What??? How is that joyful? To understand, we have to read on, and understand the perspective of Isaiah’s audience – they people who have messed up, suffered, struggled, and lost hope. Then we discover that the joy here is not in an actual circumstance but in a *promise*: that tyrants will be brought down and oppression will end. Fortresses and palaces, no matter how strong or grand, will not survive. In other words, neither force and military might, nor political power and wealth, will stand the test of time and truth.

Now, maybe that doesn’t *sound* like good news, especially if you are invested in fortresses or living in a palace. This vision may be – probably should be - a little uncomfortable to us because as middle-class Americans, the truth is we *are* invested in fortresses and most of us live in homes that would seem like palaces to the world’s poor. But this *is* a hopeful vision for people who are oppressed. It’s ultimately a hopeful vision for everyone because it proclaims God’s justice. It is for all of us because it rests on the understanding that no one is free until we are all free. This is a dream– God’s dream – of a hopeful future. What *will* endure? Places that provide a refuge for the needy. Safe places where no one has to live in fear. Inclusive communities where everyone has a place at the table and the abundance of the land is not for some but for all. Sanctuaries where the comforting, healing presence of God is experienced.

The passage ends on the same note of joy it begins with: the hopeful vision invites people who might not have much cause for rejoicing to return to joy. Not because justice has fully come. Not because the “song of the ruthless” has been silenced. But because, as Martin Luther King said, “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Because we have a God who dreams that hopeful dream with us and promises that it is not a pipe dream. And because our ultimate hope is in God.

The Isaiah passage looks forward to the future, but it remembers the past as well: God has done wonderful things – how could we forget? God’s plans and hopes for the people God has made were “formed of old, faithful and sure.” God’s desire and love for us have never changed. They have sustained us in the past. And so we trust God for our future.

Then, in Romans 12, Paul offers a word of hope that’s more of an instruction for the present time. The exhortation to rejoice is wrapped up with a number of other pieces of straight-forward guidance for the life of faith: Hold fast to what is good. Love one another. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Extend hospitality to strangers.

Again, this is not “rejoice” because everything is good and all figured out. It’s “rejoice in *hope*.” Rejoicing is clearly meant to be understood not just a feeling or attitude but as a practice that’s part of faithful Christian living. Why? Why do *any* of those things that Paul talks about here? Because they matter and they make a difference. Because we belong to a God who cares about such things. Because they reflect who we are meant to be. Because we are part of God’s work in the world. Because these things bring hope. Because everything is not hopeless ...and that is both reason to rejoice and reason to persevere in the work.

Our Advent reflections on hope usually center around the feeling or attitude of hope and how we can capture it or hold on to it. But these verses from Romans bring home to me another equally important perspective on hope: that hope is something we can be about *giving* as well as seeking. That's the message of this short essay on the struggle for social justice, written by Victoria Safford:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of hope — not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of self-righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges; nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right,” but a very different, sometimes very lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it might be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle — and we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.

I love that metaphor of staking out a position of hope, and from that place acting, calling, looking for, speaking, living hope even in the face of struggle. And did you notice? She identifies joy as a hallmark of that struggle. There is something about engagement with hope - and about hopeful engagement with life - that connects us with joy. So maybe we need to think of Advent as not just a time for shoring up or clinging to hope, but also for *bringing* hope to people and situations where hope is desperately needed – right now.

Jan Richardson writes, “Hope opens us to the future but releases us into the present.” Advent invites us to be fully present in the now, looking for where and how God is at work ... and figuring out how we can join ourselves to that work.

Our Advent tasks then, I would suggest, are these:

- To be on the look out for signs of hope
- To be looking for what God is doing
- To ask how we can participate
- To ask how and where and to whom we can be or bring hope

Each one of us might also ask ourselves:

What is it I hope for?

How does that hope inspire me to act now?

How does that hope recall me to the holy joy of belonging to Christ in this season?

Amen.

Resources

Isaiah (Interpretation Commentary), Christopher R. Seitz

“Hope” by Victoria Safford, quoted by Parker Palmer in “Hope is the place where joy meets the struggle” posted in onbeing.org/blog

“The Luminous Darkness: Searching for Solace in Advent and Christmas” by Jan Richardson, posted on theadventdoor.com