



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Invincible Joy

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

December 13, 2009

Third Sunday in Advent (Year C)

Isaiah 12:2-6

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Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,

for the Lord God is my strength and my might;

he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day:

Give thanks to the Lord,

call on his name;

make known his deeds among the nations;

proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;

let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,

for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Given the ice on the roads and in the parking lot this morning, I suspect that many of you had some adventure getting to the church this morning. I know I did. In fact, I had a little driving mishap in my own driveway, and that makes me a bit nervous. Things haven't been going to well for the last person I know of who had an accident in his own driveway. I'm just thankful I didn't hit a fire hydrant or a tree.

As I was sliding sideways down my driveway this morning, joy seemed far away. And while the circumstances may be quite different, I suspect that most of us know what that feeling is like. That's why I'm convinced that if there's anything we need—this year perhaps more than any other—it is joy. For when I look around, or listen to those around me, there is very little evidence of a life that is cloaked in joy and gladness.

No, most folks aren't covered in joy, because so many things are conspiring against us these days: The flagging economy that nips at us daily, sapping energy and keeping us up nights. An uncertain job market. Health concerns for ourselves or those we love. The

pressures on our children and families. The constant din of argument that rages in our culture. Threats of terrorism and a lingering war. All of these things and so many more build alliances to nip at us, and even as we walk through the store aisles and we find the perfect gift for someone, or when our kitchens are filled with the pleasant aromas of cookies baking, and as we listen to the music of this season sounding everywhere we turn—and in our own hearts as well—even in the midst of all these things, joy eludes us.

Oh, occasionally you meet someone who's bubbling over with giddiness, but scratch beneath the veneer and you'll soon discover it's not always real. No, if there's anything we need today, it's joy.

So when Isaiah breaks into song this morning, and invites us to join him, it's welcome news indeed. Even though things around him looked bleak, he still found voice to sing:

*God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.
With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in
that day:
Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.
Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.*

Advent is the season in which our longing merges with the longing of God. It's a time of watching in anticipation for the coming of God's promised reign. It's a time of waiting for God to set things right.

In an article about this season, someone once wrote, "Advent does not begin in buoyancy or celebration or in a shopping spree. The natural habitat of Advent is a community of hurt. It is the voice of those who know profound grief, who articulate it and don't cover it over. But this *community of hurt* knows where to speak its grief....It remembers far back, behind the present trouble, the name of the God who presides over our hurt, who is Lord in the hurt, and who will bring it to a full end. And this community of hurt is profoundly a *community of hope*. It hopes passionately that the trouble will end. And the end of the trouble will come when God returns to override the hurt and establish a kingdom of well-being for those who have endured and expressed the hurt." (Walter Brueggemann, *Proclamation Commentary*, The First Sunday in Advent.)

So can we express the hurt of this community? Of this world? Are we bold enough to acknowledge that we are a people who are waiting desperately for some glimpse of the glory of God?

This is a time of waiting between. These days before Christmas afford us all sorts of opportunities to wait. There's the simple waiting between seeing a gift with our name on it under the tree and waiting to open it.

There's the joyful waiting between receiving an invitation to spend time with your family on Christmas and feasting that day.

There's the anxious waiting between purchasing that perfect gift for your child and waiting to see his expression when he tears into it on Christmas morning.

But, if we dare to be honest, we are also waiting between other things. And that waiting isn't so joyful. It's a wait that happens in the barren places of our souls.

There's the waiting between biopsy and diagnosis.

There's the waiting between sending a child in the military overseas and his coming home.

There's the waiting between an end to conflict in Iraq and peace.

There's the waiting between the birth of a Savior for all the world and the establishment of his kingdom of justice and peace.

There's the waiting between Friday and Sunday, between death and resurrection.

That's the church's cycle of waiting. We tend to be Saturday people, living between the death of God on Friday and the resurrection of God on Sunday. Enduring the long Saturday when nothing seems to be happening and it seems as if all that we're hoping for and praying for and longing for won't ever happen. Sometimes it seems as if these promises of God aren't going to come true, as if the mountains will only get higher and the valleys will only get lower. Sometimes it seems as if God isn't on the way at all, and that we're left alone to wait, and there's little left for which to hope.

In that type of waiting, we may find ourselves like those who read of God in the scriptures and finally scream, "Move off the page, God, and come near. Move off the page to our trouble. Move to our cancer diagnoses. Move to Iraq. Move to our grief. Do what you have done in the past, and come down and save us."

In one of his prayers, Old Testament professor Walter Brueggemann looks at the world groaning for redemption and exclaims, "No wonder there is fear, reams of despair, and acres of weeping!" He goes on to ask God to help us who feebly watch and wait to learn how "to weep while we wait, and how to hope while we weep, and how to care while we hope."

"To weep while we wait." "To hope while we weep." "To care while we hope."

That's what this season of Advent is for. Advent begins in the pain and loss of the wilderness, in the barren places, in the darkness, and suddenly, unexpectedly, God breaks in to set things right.

But to cling to that hope as we wait and weep means to go against everything that

surrounds us. It is to affirm against all evidence to the contrary that there is a reason to trust in God.

During this season of Advent, I've been spending some time reading some of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was ultimately executed by the Nazi regime, wrote about the events of Advent and Christmas. One poem especially captured what the joy we are called to embody looks like. He writes:

*Joy abides with God,
and it comes down from God
and embraces spirit, soul, and body;
and where this joy has seized a person,
there it spreads,
there it carries one away,
there it bursts closed doors.
A sort of joy exists
that knows nothing at all
of the heart's pain, anguish, and dread;
it does not last,
it can only numb a person for the moment.
The joy of God has gone through
the poverty of the manger
and the agony of the cross;
that is why it is invincible,
irrefutable.*

And now, as those who have been claimed by God, let us stand together to affirm what we believe:

**God sent his Son to announce that God's promised kingdom is at hand.
We testify that God is at work here and now
when people obey Christ's commission
to witness to him and make disciples of all nations,
when they spread the good news by their words
and embody it in their lives.
We are to proclaim by word and deed
that Christ gave himself to set people free
from sin and self-hatred, from ignorance and disease,
from all forms of oppression, and even from death.
We are to offer them in Christ's name fullness of life now and forever.**