

The One Who Is Coming

A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli for A Sermon for Every Sunday. Advent 3, Year B

Text: John 1:6-8, 19-28

November 4th, 2020 was a Wednesday. It was the day after the presidential election. And, since it was Wednesday, it was a day I set up my stack of boxes on top of an ottoman in the purple parlor of my home, ran an ethernet cable from the second floor interwebs box down the stairs to plug into my laptop perched on the boxes, rigged the stationary sheer curtain on the picture window behind me with a random curtain rod to provide protection from glare, and then sat in on the sofa for a while in the swirl of emotion and thoughts stirred by that particular, historical moment. I was preparing for my weekly FaceBook Live “ponderings,” an unscripted, mid-week message that was part of my weekly ministry rhythm through the pandemics of 2020.

What I shared that day was a reminder that our work in the world is the same regardless of who is president—because our God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. But what caught me off-guard as I began to speak was the joy I felt and proclaimed in that moment of deep uncertainty. I was surprised to hear myself proclaim “this is the day the Lord has made, let’s *rejoice*.” Because in addition to uncertainty, I was among those feeling deep disappointment (and maybe some despair) about how the election continued to reveal the chasm that so starkly

divides the people of this nation and the ongoing vitriol and violence being perpetrated as a result. I share this experience as an example of the way that joy can surprise us sometimes. I felt strange and perhaps guilty that day proclaiming any message of rejoicing. And yet, in my unscripted sermon, it was joy that emerged.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent—or *Gaudete/Rejoice* (Latin) Sunday. The traditional focus is on “joy.” The pink color of the candle we light on this Sunday is a symbol of the joy that emerges as we draw closer to the birth of Christ. And it seems that every year as this Sunday rolls around the tension between the painful realities in the world and the invitation to joy is so taut that it could snap at any moment... If that has been true in past years, Lord knows it is true now. So many hearts are lonely and bodies hungry, so many lives have been shattered by gun violence and climate change, so many wars rage all around the world, corruption and prejudice and white supremacy continue to rove the world like hungry beasts... In the midst of all this and so much more, we are invited to contemplate joy. Joy.

Notice I did not say to *feel* joy as if we could manufacture it. As with that moment during my livestream, joy appears when it will. And it doesn't equate to being "happy." It is something else altogether.

The late Orthodox Christian Priest Alexander Schmemmann once wrote, "The knowledge of the fallen world does not kill joy, which emanates in this world, always, constantly, as a bright sorrow."

I have been captivated by the phrase "a bright sorrow" all the years since first encountering these words. It captures the tension that seems inherent in any honest experience of joy. Describing joy as an emanation of "a bright sorrow" is enigmatic but seems, somehow, true. Within the context of our spiritual tradition, the pain and injustice of this broken world may kill many things, but cannot kill joy.

As I pondered all this I wondered why those who organized the Revised Common Lectionary selected this encore story of John right after last week's story of John—really just two different gospel accounts of the same story. And why would they select this gospel story for "Rejoice Sunday?"

Certainly, the emphasis is different between the two accounts of John. But do we really need both of these texts so close to each other? Maybe someone remembered how quickly we move on; how easy and typical it is for us to ignore the prophets. After all, prophets often rub us the wrong way. They repeat themselves. They won't let things go. They won't let us off the hook. They have seen into the depth of pain and suffering around us such that they will not rest until freedom comes. Spirit has touched them so that they care less about their own daily rounds and more about the propagation of food for the hungry, shelter for the unhoused, sustenance for those who are impoverished, friendship with the outcast and the lonely, dignity and equity for the oppressed, and renewal for societies breaking under the weight of shiny, fast things like words and bullets and needles and machines and the siren call of excess. Prophets could give a flip about our respectability politics and are impatient with things that don't matter to the nourishment of human bodies and spirits and are fearless in advocacy against all that does harm. Prophets are always trying to get up in our business!

Maybe the setup of the lectionary is a way to mimic the actual activity of wilderness criers across the ages, the way they show up again and again and again crying out in hope that someone will finally get the message. This prophet, John, baptizes with water and points to the one who is coming after...the one more

powerful, the one who baptizes with Holy Spirit, the one who is the light of the world. Are we paying attention? Are we willing to stay in the flow of the river of grace and mercy long enough to step into a truly new way of being in the world? Are we receiving what John is saying?

The one who is coming with Holy Spirit power and as light seen by people who walk in darkness is prophesied in the book of Isaiah. And both these prophecies were received in times of temptation to idolatry, times of upheaval and danger for the nation of Israel. Just as we experience today, fear, anxiety, distraction, violence, vulnerability, and discouragement were all part of the picture. So much of the wilderness criers' message is a warning and a call to repentance...but here and there and now and again, all of a sudden, the prophetic texts are punctuated with lines like these—like joy that bubbles up out of nowhere:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

³You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;...

⁴For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken...

⁶For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace...
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness... (Isaiah 9:2-7, selected)

And these...

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
... to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
²to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,...
to comfort all who mourn;...
⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
For I the LORD love justice... (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8, selected)

These ancient words give content to our Advent hope and undergird the prophecy of John centuries later. Notice that the promise is liberation, peace, righteousness, justice. Notice that the anointed one comes to set people free *so that* they might participate in building up, raising up, repairing what has been devastated over many generations. // And perhaps this is the heart of the matter.

John was raised up—like the prophet Isaiah—as a witness to God and reminds us again and again, Advent after Advent, year after year, (and this year) week after week, that God is at work, that One more powerful is coming to meet us in the wildernesses and tensions and broken places of our lives, and that, with God’s help, we ourselves have a part to play in what God is doing in the world.

You and I will be baptized with Holy Spirit! You and I will be given light when the night is long so that we might journey through until the storm passes over and the morning comes. And this, *so that* you and I will be set free and given power to participate with God in God’s mighty acts of salvation, love, justice, and reparation of the devastation of generations... We can be part of God’s work in the world! Our time is connected to God’s time, our history is part of God’s salvation history, our lives—even yours and mine—are called to participate in the prophetic work of God’s mending and movement toward the divine vision of creation restored in all wholeness.

I once wrote, “Prophetic witness will always cry out in grief over the suffering of innocents, the callous inhumanity of so many in power, the greedy destruction of what is good and true and beautiful. Because a prophet looks upon the world and sees beauty and goodness, love and harmony, sees both what is and what can be.”

To perceive even in or through the pain of the present moment “what can be” might be described as an emanation of “a bright sorrow”...a longing for that which is possible, but is not yet manifest. To look deeply into the now and yet perceive One who is coming into the world to enfold and energize us with purposeful lives and with a love that, in the final analysis, will always win...that might inspire at least an inkling...of joy.

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