

Reflection for December 13, 2020

Third Sunday of Advent

Mary for the World

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...

Those who dream...sow joy.

May the peace of the Lord be always with you.

Let us pray:

Loving God, Holy Creator, Nurturer, and Guide, may we awaken each morning feeling we are part of your greater plan for good. May we have meaningful work and activity in life. Help us to remember that you are the power in whom we live, move, and have our being. When we dispense blessing, forgiveness, and kindness—wherever we find ourselves this day—may we twinkle and sparkle, radiating light and peace, not as this world gives, but as you give. Through Jesus, may we be a star in the shadows of life. Shine in our souls. May our work be your love! Amen.

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally the Sunday of joy. The good news is offered to those who find themselves in less than joyful situations: the brokenhearted, the captive, and the oppressed. Dr. Richard Topping, Principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, reflects on Paul's words to the Thessalonians: "The world is a challenging and anxious place just now with COVID-19, a warming planet, a troubled

economy, income inequity and racism. Don't be anxious...,well, that bit makes me anxious. And they haunt us as we remain stuck at home with our kids, trying not to yell, striving to care appropriately for aging parents, wanting to turn from racial bias and discrimination, strapping on your mask and living lightly on the earth, and of course minding your privilege. And all of it is so important and crucial and necessary." And Jocelyn Bell, Editor of Broadview, echoes those same sentiments: "...let's face it: 2020 was a train wreck...it can feel like hope is fading faster than the final ember at the tip of a candlewick. Would it be foolish to envision a better 2021?"

We have had enormous challenges in this year of the pandemic— personally, professionally, financially, politically. We are living in a time when many people are suffering from discouragement, depression, and disillusionment. Are we able to experience joy in the midst of all this? It is necessary to distinguish between happiness and joy. We tend to equate happiness with joy, but they are two different ways of being. Happiness is a byproduct not a goal. Joy, on the other hand, originates directly from the Spirit of the living God. "Joy, throbs throughout Scripture as a profound, compelling quality of life that transcends the events and disasters that may confront God's people. It is a divine dimension of living that is not shackled by circumstances" (Elaine Crawford).

In the passage from Isaiah, the people are living under economic oppression and face the daily pressures of living in a corrupted society. Isaiah proclaims the good news of divine reversal. It is a promise of redemption and a promise of exaltation of the afflicted. Soon, the shame and sorrow will be replaced with eternal joy. Joy is grounded in the divine exchanges that bring us out of darkness into God's marvelous, promised light. "The beauty of the season of Advent is not in what we have, but in who has us. It is not in what we can buy, but in

remembering the price already paid for our salvation. The joy is not what we are getting, but in the gift gave us on that first Christmas morn. God wrapped God's self in flesh and exchanged glory for a manger. God exchanged divinity for humanity" (Elaine Crawford).

Like Isaiah, Mary's song shows us that sowing joy emerges as we surrender to God's vision. Mary praises God as she anticipates the fulfillment of God's promise to her ancestors and generations to come. Joy, anticipatory joy, is the only response of the faithful. In Mary's Magnificat, we find a picture of a God who has a heart for the underdog and is concerned about people who have been made to feel like nobodies. Mary, despite dangers, fears, risks, and unended dreams, "magnified the Lord and rejoiced in God."

Joy is a choice we make when we look at our present circumstances through the eyes of faith, trusting that God is at work and that God will never abandon us. Mary rejoices because God's work is being done, and because she has become a participant in the working out of God's will in and for the world. "This is not a gospel of gain; this is a gospel of trust. It's not a gospel of wealth; it's a gospel of thanks" (Amy-Jill Levine). "What does Mary's song mean for the rich? I see her words as an invitation. It is an invitation for us to humble ourselves before God and to be used by God to fulfill the first words of that line—to help the poor walk away full. I am called to share my resources and to pass along the blessings I've received. In seeking to bless and encourage and lift up other people, they are sent away full and I discover what it means to be blessed" (Adam Hamilton).

As we embrace the joy of serving God and neighbour, our personal and communal mission, we discover the essence of our existence. People who dream sow joy. I stumbled upon this heart-rending story about John who is a forty-four-year old living in metropolitan San Francisco. During the last two years, he has slept in his car on the streets. He has

witnessed scary things: drug users and dealers, thieves who moved stolen electronics around his car, even the horror of a woman beaten in the middle of the street. He has been harassed by residents and police. John recently has found at least a tiny slice of home in the corner of a church parking lot. Being there, he says, gives him a feeling of being settled. He no longer has to sleep with one eye open. One of the church elders commented: "All these people have a story. All of them have dreams. Just like us, they are all on a path to their dreams."

Dr. Topping concludes his Christmas letter by quoting the prescient words of his beloved teacher: "Our present experience of life may be very dark, undoubtedly. We may face fearful prospects. But even at its most burdensome, our lives now are not perilously poised over some great chasm into which we may fall at any time. No, our lives are hidden with Christ in God. And our future isn't some dark possibility lying over the horizon waiting to devour us. No, it's the place where we will encounter the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (John Webster).

Rev. Bill Cantelon