

“The Thrill of Hope”

Today is *Gaudete* Sunday. It is the Sunday of Joy. It is the Sunday when we hear the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song of joy. She sings it after her cousin Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, proclaims with a loud cry:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”¹

As those who are in the Advent Bible Study know, this puts Elizabeth into a select group of women biblical prophets. Elizabeth has divined through the Spirit that Mary, who is not visibly pregnant, is the mother to be of Our Lord.

It is a beautiful scene. We have two women who are miraculously pregnant—Elizabeth in her old age and Mary in her virginity. These women like Miriam, Deborah, and Hannah before them break forth in songs of joy exalting God, because, as Gabriel said, nothing is impossible with the Lord.

While we do not hear that scripture today, we do hear another marvelous poetic prophecy from the Book of Isaiah.² The prophecy is in three voices, which is why I did the unusual thing of asking three readers to speak the passage. I wanted everyone to get the sense of this being a conversation as well as a proclamation. The speakers are the prophet, the LORD (YHWH), and the people of Israel who having heard the proclamations of the prophet and God respond.

In the first section the prophet speaks of being anointed by God for a special job. It is a tremendous job of caring for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, and captives. The prophet is also to care for those who mourn in Zion that is, Jerusalem. They are mourning the destruction of the city. The prophet’s mission is to encourage them and build them up, because their mission is to rebuild the Jerusalem. The prophet’s mission is a huge proposition. I cannot imagine any one person realistically taking that on.

God follows the prophet first my staking out moral high ground reminding us that God loves justice and hates robbery and wrongdoing. What’s more God restates the Abrahamic covenant. That is, God emphasizes making an everlasting covenant with those who do justice, something that is echoed later by the prophet Micah.³ This promise states that all the nations will know Israel to be the “people whom the Lord has blessed.” The people of Jerusalem who have lived captive in Babylon for nearly sixty years⁴ must have found this

¹ Luke 1:42-45 NRSV

² Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

³ Micah 6:8

⁴ 597 B.C.E.–538 B.C.E.-

music to their ears. Few if any of the original exiles would be alive, but they had all heard stories of the precious homeland and the holy city. Return would also mean freedom from the oppression of the Babylonians.

The third section of the reading is the people's response to God. Not surprisingly they rejoice in the Lord and exult in God with their entire being. They praise God using imagery of a beautiful wedding and also of plants shooting forth from the earth in spring time.

We can be like the ancient prophet and those ancient Israelites; indeed I think we are called to be. There is no question that our country and our world are filled with people who feel oppressed, brokenhearted, and captive. The *annus horribilis* that has been 2020 is hopefully reaching an end. For many the dawning of the year 2021 will feel like an *annus mirabilis* with the coming of the Covid vaccine, and the return to a more normal type of life that allows hugs, mask-free gatherings, and in-person events such as church.

It is our job as lovers of God to take on the mantle of the prophet and do as he was commanded to do. That is to preach love to our neighbors, give care to those who are despondent, and proclaim liberty and freedom to those who feel confined and imprisoned by this pandemic. We are the ones who are to share the Good News that God loves us and cares for us. We are to share the faith and joy that we find in God and his son our Savior Jesus Christ.

This *Gaudete* Sunday let us lean into the joy that shines from the rose candle. Let us take the light of Christ into our hearts, and like Mary magnify that light to shine out into the world as a beacon of the everlasting trust in God's favor; the favor that exists even in the midst of darkness. For the love of God is sure and everlasting. Have faith in it now and share it with the tired and cynical world that we may all revel in the "thrill of hope" for "yonder breaks a new and glorious morn."⁵

⁵ From "O Holy Night" by Adolphe Adam