

Sermon – December 15, 2019

“Restored in Joy”

Text: Ezra 1:1-4; 3:10-13

Christmas is just around the corner – 10 days from now to be exact. Families are busy planning to get together, travel tickets are purchased, menus are planned, trees are decorated, colourful lights ablaze and our hearts are warmed at the thoughts of a joyful Christmas gathering. But some have a depressing look at Christmas. Being together with family is not good news for everyone. Not good news for those confronted with illness or grief or those who do not have the comfort of a home. Not good news for the community where shelters for the homeless like The Mission and Elizabeth Fry are filling up again as the days get colder. FAMSAC will be busy putting together hampers for those who cannot afford a decent meal. There is nothing worse than feeling alone and hopeless, when the rest of the world seems to be gushing with joy. Globally, we are not there yet in terms of Joy. That deep-seated contentment that allows us to view life positively. World hunger, homelessness and poverty have not been eradicated. Wars and violence have not somehow disappeared with the anticipated arrival of the so-called Prince of Peace. We do not have to look too far. We are not there yet in terms of Joy.

I once heard a preacher say that the flip side of joy is disappointment. For the past two Advent Sundays, Jeremiah and Second Isaiah tells us stories of disappointment. On Advent 1, God spoke to Jeremiah in the midst of an embattled and besieged Jerusalem. On Advent 2, Jerusalem has fallen, and God spoke through Isaiah to the grieving people who fled or were exiled to Babylon which is the modern-day Iraq. Life had become like a wilderness to the people. Their sons and daughters had been killed. Their king had been brainwashed by the enemy. Their city Jerusalem had been burned down to ashes. Jerusalem, with all of its religious importance, with its temple and levitical structures, as a social center, as a political center for Judah, had been destroyed - razed to the ground — burnt. The temple was the heart of the community – the hub of the people’s spirituality and way of life. The temple had fallen. And with it, all the people’s dreams, all their hopes, all their aspirations had all crumbled to ashes. The people had been in exile as slaves for fifty or more years.

Then there was a shift. Those years in exile are over. Today's passage, unlike the last two Sundays, is not written for people living in captivity, but rather to people who had been liberated and had returned home - which had been their fervent dream and hope and prayer for generations. So as the curtain rises on this third Sunday in Advent, we hear the voice of the scribe and priest Ezra who wrote about the pilgrimage of the exiles returning home to Jerusalem after a decree was issued by King Cyrus of Persia. Maybe he was fostering loyalty. Maybe he was just being a nice guy. But what a proclamation it was! Go home, start your life again in your homeland. This was their dream come true. Finally, they can go home. Finally, they can return to being the people of God and sing the songs about God in their homeland.

I'm sure there were mixed emotions coming home. And you have to ask yourself, what were they returning to? What was there in Jerusalem for them to go back to? Did they have work that support their livelihood? They had been away from the place. Fifty years is a long time to be away from your home. Some found their old houses but doesn't belong to them anymore. Somebody else lives there. Others were told to get off by the current owner of the property. Others say, "But I grew up here! This is my home!" But it wasn't their home anymore. They were displaced. People have lived through events like that and we've been there ourselves—the horrors of invasion and war, the loss of hope, the loss of property, the death, the injury, the separation of families.

In a sermon preached by the Rev. Barbara Lundblad, she shared the story of a young woman during World War II named Etty Hillesum. Etty kept a journal of her days under German occupation in her native Holland. As she watched the slow destruction of the Jewish ghetto in Amsterdam, she wrote: "The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days... But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed... And it spreads its scent round the House in which You dwell, oh God. You can see, I look after You. I bring you not only my tears and my forebodings on this stormy, grey Sunday morning, I even bring you scented jasmine. I shall try to make you at home always."

Somehow in the ruins and rubble of her life, Etty came to a place of deep assurance. She brings her tears and her forebodings, the grayness of the day and the scent of jasmine. She speaks directly to God saying, “I shall try to make You at home always.”

It was a terrible thing to experience, and that's what these homecoming exiles experienced. They had nothing. Absolutely nothing. All they had was the promise of God. The promise alluded to here is a reflection, an indication of their faith in a God who keeps promises; the God who remembers covenant; the God who says and keeps word. And they echo what Etty proclaims: “ We shall try to make You at home always.”

Despite the many challenges that confronted the homecoming exiles, there is one thing that united them. They returned with a grand vision. They were going to rebuild the temple. That was their vision; to rebuild God’s house – the symbol of God's presence amongst the people. Along with this grand vision comes also the celebration of their religious festivals. They realized that if they were going to continue to follow God faithfully it was necessary for them to incorporate their religious traditions back into their lives. This was one more step toward reclaiming their identity as God's people. The restoration of the temple was as much a physical act as it was a spiritual act. It wasn’t simply architectural or engineering in nature; this was a symbol of the people’s love of God. Like the restoration of the Notre Dame cathedral in France or when we renovate or improve our church building. And when the temple foundation is laid there was great joy and celebration but there was also weeping and crying. The weeping was almost as loud as the shouts of joy.

How is this story of the exiles prepare us in this season of Advent? Peggy Aitchison commented that if Advent ushers in a new beginning, then the homecoming of the exiles paved a new beginning for that community. This story invites us to return home – not to the same place of birth or where we have lived, but to return to the source of life, the source of love, the source of joy. For the exiles, they have returned to the source of their covenant. They returned to their God, the source of their being.

So what do we do with this passage from Ezra as we deal with our sighs and worries and sorrows and disappointments this Advent? What needs to be restored in your life? What feelings of discontent or moments of disconnect and sadness need to be rebuilt so that they become moments of joy? The story of the people rebuilding the temple offers a word of resurrection to all of us. Amidst the seemingly hopeless situation where glimpses of death in many forms confront us in many directions, we are consoled knowing that there is always a bright light at the end of every tunnel. We imagine a new world – despite the realities of war, racism, homophobia, economic poverty and political dishonesty, amidst the many personal hurts and disappointments, God is at work through life-giving individuals, restoring the broken, healing the sick, and welcoming the outcast. The dream of Shalom seems impossible, but we must live in hope and know that it won't happen without our efforts. We are part of God's vision of healing the world.

Advent reminds us that another world is possible and we can be part of it. New life can emerge from the ruins and lives will be restored. Advent too is a time of mixed emotions – a time when we are nudged to recognize the deep-seated hurts and pains, or situations of hopelessness and difficult moments. But take heart. The God of Advent comes to us in our exile, changing our darkness into light, sorrow into singing, fear into joy, exile into exaltation, and brings us home. No matter how bleak the tragic course of history, how unnerving our personal circumstances, or how pessimistic the forecasts of intellectuals, with joy we can expect God's love to blossom even in the dust and dirt of our lives. There is still joy in the world!

Amen.

Sources:

BCUC lectionary Group

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