

Today we light the rose-coloured candle of Joy for the Third Sunday of Advent.

You know, it is hard for a lot of us to get our minds and our moods around Joy right now. I feel that way more often than I would like, and I hear others say that, too. We want to talk about and think about happy things - and we do – but worries and fears about the pandemic are never far from our conversations and thoughts. Many of us, or people we know, are feeling depressed. We are missing so much of what gave us joy before. We cannot even worship physically together in the same ways that we did before.

We feel like exiles from the lives we had.

And that is why this is such a perfect time to encounter joy in the salvation story, joy overflowing even in the midst of fear and suffering. It's a very great gift that we need right now!

Through Advent, we have been exploring prophetic writings from the Book of Isaiah set in the late years of the Babylonian exile and the early period after returning home. On Advent 1, we heard about the yearning of the people for God to come and rescue them: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down”. (64:1) We heard the pain of their penitence and their hope for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Last week on Advent 2, we heard about their rising expectations that their waiting would soon be over, and they would be home

and living in peace. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.” (40:11)

Today’s passage was written after they returned to Judah. It was a difficult time. In fact, the “tear open the heavens and come down” passage comes from that same period. The cities and towns were in ruins. People who had remained there when the elite were deported to Babylon were not happy to see them coming back and taking control. The Samaritans believed *they* were the true followers of Moses to whom the land was promised, and *theirs* was the real temple. Kingdoms nearby were worried about a resurgent Jerusalem and tried to stop them from rebuilding.

The passage acknowledges the pain, but even so, it overflows with hope and joy. Joy amid suffering. An exultant vision of the future: “All who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed”. (61.9b) The Spirit of God is with them. “Good news to the oppressed”; “bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”. (61:1-2) In Luke’s gospel, Jesus reads those very words from Isaiah to the synagogue congregation and declares them fulfilled today in their hearing. It is how he announced who he was and what was his mission.

It is a bold vision that Isaiah portrays. “Proclaim liberty” and “year of the Lord’s favour” connect with the idea of Jubilee in Leviticus (*chapter 25*). God commanded Moses on Mount Sinai that every fiftieth year was to be a Jubilee, in which all debts would be forgiven, all who had been

indentured or enslaved by debt would be freed, and all who had been compelled to sell lands or homes would get them back. It is a very radical idea of “reset”, of how justice and the common good should be rescued from heartless operation of the economy.

God said, “The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants.”

(Lev. 25:23) I actually like the King James Version better: “for you are strangers and sojourners with me”.

“Sojourners” has emerged in truth and reconciliation circles as a replacement for “Settlers”. In Indigenous traditions the land belongs to no human; we *all* are sojourners; we *all* must share what the earth gives us. We need to learn from those traditions! They remind us of things in Judeo-Christian traditions that we have forgotten.

When Isaiah says he is sent to bring good news to the oppressed and proclaim liberty and the year of the LORD’s favour, this – Jubilee - is the kind of new world order he is announcing! At Mount Sinai, God called Israel to be an example to the whole world of the joy of living together God’s way. Israel lost its way; Jubilee did not happen in their pre-exile. The prophets called them back to what God commanded.

And 500 years later, so does the amazing, feisty young Mary carrying the Messiah in her womb. Mary was not just a means for Jesus to come into the world; Mary had agency. In today’s gospel, she is a prophet! She proclaims a world turned upside down, where the proud, the powerful and the rich are humbled, removed from their thrones and relieved of their wealth, where the lowly are lifted up, and the hungry are well-fed.

God still calls us back to that vision. You and I are not going to turn the world upside down and bring about justice and peace for all people and all creation tomorrow or next year or even in our lifetimes. But the vision still lives in us and makes the world better. We are evolving toward tight relation with God and all our earthly relations. Isaiah says: “For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before the nations.”

To get there by whatever path, we must be, like the prophets, vocal witnesses to suffering, pain and injustice. But God has given us other gifts, and one of the greatest is imagination. Imagination is the root of creativity. God imagined a universe and spoke it into being. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and part of that is imagination. It is the power in the words of the prophets. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote a whole book about *The Prophetic Imagination*. The powerful in ancient Israel did not want change (after all, the system worked for them!) and the rest of the people had lost the capacity to imagine that their world could be better. They closed their eyes to suffering and death. The prophets spoke to them in poetry more than prose, because only poetry and music and art can reach through numbed minds and feelings to fire imaginations and soften hearts.

We, too, live in a society that is numb to possibilities for real change, and that too often turns its eyes away from suffering and death. Advertising tries to convince us that “normal” life is all about consuming and having fun. We need prophets to open our eyes and hearts, rekindle our

imaginings, and to give us new visions of what we can do with God's help. And God is eager to help.

God gives and gives and gives. We know that from the scriptures and especially from the words and example and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know it from what is written in creation. God is infinitely generous. And we who are made in the image of God also have been given the power to be generous. We may not be able to bring about anything like Jubilee in our lifetimes, but we can be generous in thousands of smaller ways. When we are, it brings joy to giver and receiver. One beautiful example: the women of this church who made batches of Christmas cookies and cakes, and last week packaged them up beautifully (and safely!) and delivered them to people who are alone or shut in. Joy for the givers and receivers. Another example that is close to home and close to my heart: As much as it is discouraging to see the hardships of our neighbours who come to the Food Bank, I and the other volunteers experience a lot of joy in being able to help them. And sometimes we also see a joy in the recipients, not just for the food, but for the human connection, the caring, the welcome.

Joy is much more than an emotion. Joy is an ability to imagine life that is not imprisoned in present circumstances. Joy is seeing and feeling the suffering as well as the healing and liberation. Joy is taking action, in little ways and large, to bring the peaceable kingdom nearer. Joy is recognizing the good things God has done and is doing for us. Joy is knowing that God is with us and loves us and cares for us, even in the midst of fear and suffering.

Gratitude is the ground in which joy grows.

I would like to share some words that I find especially beautiful and inspiring. They are from the “Thanksgiving Address” of the Haudenosaunee people. It is hard to explain what the Address is; it is typically spoken at the beginning and sometime the end of a gathering, and it is like a prayer, but the Indigenous people see it more as a teaching and an affirmation. It is quite long, and I will use only parts of it. The words vary quite a bit among speakers of the Address but follow the same themes and pattern. I am quoting a version from a wonderful book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, by an Indigenous scientist, teacher and writer, Robin Wall Kimmerer. I hasten to add that quoting this is not cultural appropriation. Kimmerer herself has been assured by many elders that they want it shared with the world

It begins:

*“Today we have gathered and when we look upon the faces around us we see that the cycles of life continue. We have been given the duty to live in harmony and balance with each other and all living things. So now let us bring our minds together as one as we give greeting and thanks to each other as People. Now our minds are one.*

*We are thankful to our Mother the Earth, for she gives us everything we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about on her. It gives us joy that she still continues to care for us, just as she has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send thanksgiving, love and respect. Now our minds are one.”<sup>1</sup>*

It goes on with many verses like this, giving thanks for water, for fish, for plants, for berries, for medicines, for all the many gifts we have received. Each verse ends with “Now are minds are one”.

*“We now turn our hearts to the Creator, or Great Spirit, and send greetings and thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need for a good life is here on Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send out choicest word of greeting and thanks to the Creator. Now our minds are one.”<sup>2</sup>*

In a recent webinar, I heard Wall Kimmerer say that gratitude is the beginning of abundance, because when we remember all that we have been given, we are freed from the myth of scarcity. We know God that has given us and will give us, *together*, what we need. We can become generous in sharing. We can know that joy.

*“We have now arrived at the place where we end our words. Of all the things we have named, it is not our intention to leave anything out. If something was forgotten, we leave it to each individual to send such greetings and thanks in their own way. And now our minds are one.”<sup>3</sup>*

And now in the joy of Christ, may all our minds be one.  
Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Wall Kimmerer, Robin. *Braiding Sweetgrass*. (Milkweed Editions, 2013) pp. 107-8

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 115

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 117