

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 13, 2009
Christmas Music Sunday
Lessons: Isaiah 12:1-6 and Luke 13:10-17

BUT THE PEOPLE REJOICED

I imagine an artist must enjoy seeing the medium begin to take the shape of the vision for it. The block of wood starts turning into a bird, the blank canvass or computer screen begins to express form and feeling, or the symphony starts to sound “right” as it blends notes and instruments. The mature artist realizes that following the vision requires overcoming obstacles and setbacks, but that’s “the fun of it all.” Otherwise, anybody could do it. If it were as easy as a few mouse clicks or splashes of paint, why would the artist bother?

At the beginning of Rogers and Hammerstein’s musical, “Oklahoma,” Curley jumps over the fence and sings, “O What a Beautiful Morning,” which repeats the line, “I’ve got a beautiful feeling everything’s going my way.” That’s a great feeling on those rare and brief occasions when we experience it, but it is not necessary for the enjoyment of life that *everything* be going our way. What we need is a vision of life supported in the present by some progress toward realizing that vision, some sense that our lives are taking the form of the promise. And faith always tries to leave room for God’s surprises – those unplanned, unexpected moments when by sheer grace, we receive more than we asked for or even thought to ask for.

Depression sets in when the vision fades to black or when we still see it in our minds but find ourselves blocked from making any progress toward it. Without the vision, we lose hope. Without signs of progress, we find no joy. We need both hope and joy, but they need substance and truth. A fantasy is not a vision that holds any real promise. Neither is entertainment the same as the enjoyment of life that comes from moving toward the vision with a sense of progress and accomplishment. When we substitute fantasies for hope and escapes for enjoyment of life, we are in trouble. I have nothing against certain amounts of fantasy and pleasurable diversion, but they are like sweets — pleasant in small doses but sickening when if I pig out on them and a very poor substitute for substantial food. If I escape too often for too long, time moves forward but I do not.

As people seeking to follow Jesus Christ, we believe there is more to life and truth than we can see, measure, or prove to the satisfaction of the skeptical. We believe God created each of us to prosper in life, but because we so strongly link prosperity to wealth, I

would say instead God made us to thrive or flourish as individuals, families, and communities. Money is a poor measure for life. We maintain hope in good times and bad because we trust that God never gives up on us, never stops caring, never gets bored with us or so disgusted as to turn away and forget all about us. Because of Jesus Christ, we believe God loves us so much that God will not abandon us, ever. When things seem to be going my way, God is with me to guide, sustain, and sometimes nudge (or jolt) me toward a better vision and more truthful, less selfish, ways of pursuing it. When I find myself stalled out and feeling helpless, God is still with me to uphold, care, and reshape my losses in preparation for something better. While I may be tempted to think I'm trying to make a life for myself, God works with me to make a person, a soul, a living and loving being who can truly thrive in the way of Jesus Christ, rather than at the expense of others. God sees success much more in terms of *who* I am becoming than in terms of *what* I am accumulating or achieving. We still need to achieve because that need is built into us, but God always cares more about the person than the accomplishments.

The worth of a person is exactly what the religious opponents of Jesus refused to see. How, we might ask, could the healing of a woman bent over to face the ground for eighteen years possibly violate God's covenant love for Israel or tarnish Israel's faithful response to that love? The problem is that by using the word "love," I have framed the question much differently from the religious leader's way of framing it. For him, the issue is earning God's approval and favor by obeying God's commandments. For Jesus, the issue is responding to God's love with justice and compassion for each other. The religious leader desires properly apportioned rewards and punishments. Jesus wants redemption. I would say salvation, as long as we do not limit salvation to heaven after death. For this woman in her present condition, salvation comes as freedom from her humiliating disability. Literally, she can stand up again and face the world; she can look forward with hope, eye to eye with other people, and upward toward the open sky. Surely, along with being a person set free, she is a paradigm for the salvation for which many now pray, *God let me stand up again, and face the future with faith's confidence. Take away the embarrassment of my situation and the fears that pull me down. Lead me forward with hope's energy. Don't let my life be wasted or spent poorly.*

The religious leader feels shamed, but the people rejoice. Maybe there is chance for redemption in both results. Maybe the leader can stop hiding behind the absurd principle that people get what they deserve in life and, likewise, deserve what they get. Surely, we see evidence all around us that it is not so. God's love and justice come as an intervention of grace, not as a matter of fact in our world. Upon seeing God heal one of their own, a person regarded as unworthy, the people rejoice. There's more to life than they have been told and more to God's love than they have been allowed to believe.

We have a message to share, but it is not easy to share it in hard times when people are frightened and discouraged. Words alone ring hollow, and pretty rituals seem to mock the realities pushing people down. We need God, and we need each other. We have the vision of hope, but we need to find ways to connect it to life *here and now* for more people so for them the words can ring true.

Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.
With joy (God promises) you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

Amen.