

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, December 12, 2010
Christmas Music Sunday
Lessons: Isaiah 29:18-24, Luke 2:10-11 and Romans 12:9-18

REJOICE IN HOPE

On the first Sunday of Advent, I said something that matters more than just one sermon that is over in about fifteen minutes, and then we all move on with our lives. Not because it is catchy or clever but because it is true, I said that the primary biblical way of addressing us about our future is not with threat but with promise. Not threat but promise. And often you will find in the Bible if you look that the promises seem too much ever to come true. They go beyond our expectations but also beyond our calculations of what is possible within the realities of nature and human life on this earth. Listen. “On that day,” the prophet proclaims, where “that day” refers to the great change coming when God comes in fullness to the people to set things right. On that day . . .

- the deaf shall hear the words read from a scroll
- out of their gloom and darkness, the eyes of the blind shall see
- the lowly shall obtain fresh joy
- the neediest people shall jump for joy
- the powerful tyrants (the people who run everything) shall be cut off
- those who can manipulate the law and the courts shall be gone
- the scoffers (who can brush off the just claims of the workers, the unemployed, and the cheated) shall be silenced.

How? How can such changes come about? Our world would not tolerate them. The wealthy and powerful would fight tooth and nail against them. Privilege means just what the word says. People of privilege have the advantage, and they make very sure to keep it.

So, is the Bible, then, nothing but a book of . . . fantastic dreams (to put it nicely)? Worse, is it a pacifier for the poor that tells them not to get upset or rebellious, not to cause any trouble, because “better days are coming”? Religion has often been abused exactly that way: as a narcotic for the cheated, a painkiller for the miserable to mollify any thoughts of actual change. “When the gods are ready,” the people are told. Someday but not yet, never here and now.

Those who so abuse the promises of justice, healing, and peace mock God. People who use their power to protect their own privilege make themselves God's enemies. The real purpose of the promises is not to postpone justice and put compassion on hold but, exactly the opposite, it is to command and encourage changes in the direction of justice and compassion precisely among us and precisely in the here and now.

I believe God refrains from simply and magically making the great changes because they need to come from us, from within and among us. How could everything be suddenly set right when our minds and hearts are still wrong? We need to want justice rather than privilege. We need to show compassion rather than scorn. For the change to be real out there in the world, we must change. God, after all, does not want a perfect world filled with hateful, selfish, greedy people. The old spiritual says, "Everybody talkin' 'bout heaven ain't goin' there." I think the real problem is that, if they were there, many people would hate the place. Jesus did not come to get us into heaven but first to get heaven into us.

The apostle Paul says a very strange thing to the believers in Rome. "Rejoice," he tells them. Great, everybody likes the feeling of joy that comes with the achievement of much-desired goals or greatly anticipated promises. We give ourselves to the hope and the work of achieving the hoped-for outcome. Excitement builds with anticipation of the results. Joy breaks across our faces in the smile of satisfaction that comes from the wonderful letdown in effort and tension when we get there – to the place we want to be, to the situation we have worked to craft, to the point where we can say, "We did it, we're there, thanks be to God!" That's the vision of joy: "Free at last, free at last! Thank God Almighty, we're free at last!" Joy comes when the vision is fulfilled, the dream come true. But what Paul says – the very strange thing he tells the Romans to do – is, rather, "Rejoice in hope."

Wait a minute. You cannot rejoice in hope, can you? By definition, hope comes before fulfillment, during the struggle, when the outcome remains uncertain. Joy comes when the uncertainty is over and the outcome achieved. It makes no sense to rejoice in hope. Who celebrates *before* the day arrives? Who takes satisfaction in the unfinished project?

The answer to that question of "Who?" is: people who have been moved to trust God with their lives and destinies. They are people for whom the promise is assured just because God in the One who has made it. Does a child not rejoice upon being told by her parents that they are talking her to her favorite place tomorrow? Does the family of someone deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan not rejoice upon learning the one they love will soon be returning home? Sure, there is still room for doubt and fear and worry. Life is that way. Nothing is guaranteed, nothing is certain to come or to last once it does come – nothing but, for us, God's faithful and redemptive love, which alone is eternal and ever-present. Because of

Jesus, we belong to that love and so does this earth of ours that seems so clueless about the true nature of its life.

If we rejoice only in the moment of satisfaction, we will lose our lives and our very selves to disappointment and grief. But if we entrust ourselves and our lives to God's love, then we will be given the strength to rejoice in hope – to find grace and a measure of peace in the valley of shadow, to smile and embrace each other even while the promise remains just that, a promise. The young child goes to bed with no doubt she will be taken the next day to her favorite place, and so she falls asleep in the peace of joy, knowing what the dawn will bring.

If you have no idea what I'm talking about or it sounds plain crazy to you, consider yourself invited to learn – not to be told, as though a mere lecture could create such hope, but to walk along with people who are learning to trust the God who comes to them in Jesus Christ. There is no magic solution, no instant happiness, no guarantee of my desires. I must learn to dream new dreams, not my own but Christ's. I must gain the courage, step by step, to put what God has promised into action – into changes in me and my own life and also into changes I seek for other people and for society. God is not the genii who grants our wishes but the God who loves us and calls us to follow Jesus into a new and different way of life, knowing that along the way we will become new and different people. And so we rejoice, not in some temporary success, but in knowing we are on the way with One we can trust on the bright mountains and in the dark valleys. Rejoice in hope. Amen.