

“Justice and Joy”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Third Sunday in Advent
Edina Morningside Community Church; December 11, 2016

Isaiah 61:1-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 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 all the nations.

Sending out Christmas cards and letters has always been more Javen's thing than my own. To be honest, I'm impatient with what seems like just another holiday ritual to cram in around the edges of an already busy season. But Javen is an amateur photographer and graphic designer, so if I can just show up to be in the picture, he takes care of the rest. That's why we ended up this past Friday night in Rice Park, in downtown Saint Paul. With its decorated trees and skating rink nearby, Rice Park is one of our favorite winter scenes to look out on from the Ordway Theater or through a restaurant window. Except this time, we weren't going to be behind protective glass, and if you remember, *Friday* is when this frigid cold moved in.

Walking to the park from a block away, I was steeling myself for the worst. The cold was enough to make cheeks numb, and got worse with each gust of the “lazy wind”—the type that doesn't bother to go around you, but goes right through you. When we got to the park and found a secluded spot under overhanging trees, I barely paid attention to the scenery. I was just focused on getting through the next fifteen minutes with as little grumpiness as possible. Javen set up the tripod and camera, dropping to one knee to look through the viewfinder, tweaking knobs with his bare hands. I kept my gloved hands in their coat pockets and practiced smiling to make sure my face could still move. The only thing I could think about was the miserable cold, my chapped lips, and how long it would take before we could get back to the car. *Merry Christmas*, bah-humbug! The Spirit of the Lord God might be on Isaiah this morning, but the spirit of the Grinch was on me.

It wasn't just Friday night though. I've had a hard time getting into the season for at least the past month. To be honest, it feels like an ill wind has blown through the world, taking away holiday cheer and leaving only the cold of winter. I find myself heartsick when I read the news: hate crimes, Syria, Russian hacking, and the decline of the American Dream. Fake news leads to real violence, but there's no easy way to stop such misinformation from reaching those who want to believe it. The cabinet appointments of this incoming administration may bring a much-needed shakeup of government bureaucracy, but I fear that their policies of privatization will take from the poor to further enrich those at the top, making life more miserable for the sick, the elderly, the mentally ill, students, people of color, and all who live on the margins. I worry about the corrupting power of extreme wealth and the access that it buys, which would be a problem no matter who won the election. And to top it all off, we're looking at several more weeks of bitter cold, worse than we've had in Minnesota for at least the past three years. It's hard to be joyful when we're hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst.

So it feels a bit jarring that "joy" is our theme for this Sunday. This day, which begins the third week of Advent, is celebrated in some parts of the world as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin word that means, "Rejoice!" We light the pink candle, the one that is special, festive and unique—the candle for joy. And this isn't just theological happiness in the coming of Christ. Gaudete—rejoice—is one of the old Latin terms behind our word, "gaudy." This joy unpacks all the sequins, feather boas, and party lights that are available. This is an over-the-top, singing-out-loud, clap-your-hands joy. Like the neighbor who goes overboard with Christmas decorations, this joy spares no expense and knows no limits. Light up the windows, the rain gutters, even the trees. Get as many different color bulbs as possible. Gaudete—let your rejoicing be bright, even gaudy!

But the skeptic in me wonders about the place for joy when so much seems in danger this Advent. May I preach and speak about the pain in the world without being a killjoy? Can we get swept up in the celebration of this season without turning our backs on a vision of peace in the world? Must we choose between justice and joy? If we follow what Isaiah has written, we see that it's not either-or, but both-and. Both justice and joy hold together, because God's faithfulness endures whether it's night or morning bright.

When this portion of Isaiah was written, decades of exile had finally ended for Israel. Our spiritual ancestors had been set free from captivity in Babylon, and they had returned to bombed-out Judah and Jerusalem. Imagine the massive reconstruction campaign that was before them. Isaiah describes building up ancient ruins, repairing the ruined cities and the devastations of many generations. Picture what was done in New York after 9/11, or in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina flooded the Ninth Ward, or what will be needed in Syria and Iraq, and you'll have a sense of the daunting physical challenge before these ancient people. Spiritual and civic renewal was needed as well because decades of imprisonment had sapped their sense of community and given the lasting impression that might makes right.

But Isaiah the prophet is undaunted by all the rebuilding and recovery work ahead. He gives joyful good news, even when it seems far from reality. Though Isaiah knows how big the problems are, he also knows God's relentless ability to accomplish divine good. Picture a plant growing in a crack of concrete, or the green new growth among blackened stumps after a forest fire, or the buds of trees and flowers that survive the winter, and you will see the power of God's renewal. "As the earth brings forth its shoots," Isaiah says, "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 all the nations." It may not come for a while, but God loves justice, hates wrongdoing, and remains faithful to God's promises. That is the source of our joy.

It was so in Isaiah's time, it was so when Jesus read these words at the start of his own ministry, and it is so in our own time. Even now, outside beneath that cold blanket of snow, new life awaits below the surface and will seize its next warm opportunity to break out in a fresh blanket of green. Likewise, when

we are shivering in the cold, daunted by the fierce winds of the world, God promises the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness. God guarantees justice, so we find joy.

Yesterday, when I looked at the photos from Friday night in Rice Park, I couldn't see the cold there anymore. Because amid all my feeling sorry for myself, I hadn't realized how bright the park is. It was only by looking from another perspective that I saw all the light in these photos, the light behind Javen and I standing there. Not a single great light like a streetlamp, but thousands of tiny little bulbs strung together. They hung over all the trees, draped so thick they looked almost like fabric, and they lit up the whole park. Because of those little lights the park was a place of cheer, despite the chill and my own sour mood. Those lights make the park joyful—a place not just for shivering, but also for wonder, snowball fights and skating. Those lights are the reason we went to Rice Park in the first place, and looking back now, I can start to see the joy there.

Coming to a sense of God's goodness at loose in the world—sometimes where we least expect to find it—is an essential first step. But that's not all—there's a second step. Amid the darkness, God opens our eyes to see the light and there is joy. Then God calls us to *be* the light for others, and there is justice as well. We are called as Christians to be like those little lights in Rice Park, strung up against the foreboding night. Lit by a power beyond ourselves, shining for those in the darkness. And in our coming together, our actions and prayers to help manifest justice on earth as in heaven, God will make sure there is joy as well. After all, that's our purpose as Edina Morningside Church: "Sharing the joy of Christ's love by welcoming and serving." Together our lights will make for justice and joy. We will see manifest—even in the cold—what Isaiah the prophet discerns. The earth will again put forth green shoots, sown gardens will yield fruit, and the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. God promises it, so we can truly rejoice!

Let us pray: *God of light, prepare our hearts with justice and joy, receiving your promise of redemption and bringing all your beloved people in out of the cold. Amen.*