

Third Sunday in Advent: December 13, 2020

The Sermon: Rev. Carol Ruthven

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God.” Isaiah 61:10
One of the things that makes it easier for us as Episcopalians is that our church calendar is color-coded. We use different colors to signify different seasons in our church calendar. Purple has traditionally been used during Advent to symbolize a season of sober yet joyful anticipation. In recent years, many congregations have been using blue for Advent. Blue is the color associated with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and today we will hear Mary’s beautiful song, The Magnificat.

The colors of the Advent candles also have symbolic meaning. Today, the third Sunday of Advent, is marked by a rose or pink candle. It is known as Gaudete (Gow’-day-tay) Sunday. Gaudete is the Latin word for “rejoice.” We rejoice that the celebration of the feast of Christmas Day is almost here. Mary’s song the Magnificat is one of rejoicing. In this third week of Advent, we take time to rejoice with thankful hearts. We know that the Light is coming and our hope is near at hand. The white candle at the center of the Advent wreath symbolizes the light of Christ and it will shine brightly on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

Throughout history, Christians have been reassured that hope is near at hand and that has been a cause for rejoicing. During Advent we joyfully anticipate Christ’s coming to be with us. We prepare to celebrate Jesus’ birth at Christmas, to receive faithfully the risen Christ who comes to us in Word and Spirit, and to await with hope Christ’s coming in final victory.

We also focus on understanding how Christ and God’s salvation have and continue to transform us and our world. Some Christians have focused on salvation in terms of who will be saved and who will get into heaven. The prophet Isaiah in our reading this morning reminds us that God’s salvation is really about living a way of life right here and now that reflects God’s desires for us and others.ⁱ Salvation concerns how we live our lives in the present, how we treat others, and what we do to help others.

For Isaiah, salvation is understood to be the good news of the Gospel, which concerns healing the sick, liberating those who are oppressed, releasing those who are imprisoned, and comforting those who are suffering (Isa. 61:1-2). God’s salvation is meant to transform the world through what we do in faithful obedience to God.ⁱⁱ Isaiah reminds us that our calling is to help those who are most marginalized, powerless, neglected and suffering. In responding to God’s mission of salvation, we serve those who most need to hear about God’s love for them and God’s ability to transform their lives to bring hope, healing, and joy.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mary, perhaps more than any other figure in the Bible, exemplifies humble obedience to God by a person, who would have been largely unseen and devalued in a paternalistic society. Mary as an unwed teenage mother would have been shunned and looked down upon by others and could even have been killed. Her concerns would have been ignored and she would have been powerless. She did not come from a family of wealth or status. She was a poor Jewish teenage girl living at a time when her nation

was under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. And yet, God chose her to be the mother of Jesus.

Mary's response to God's call for her was one of pure rejoicing and thanksgiving. She proclaimed what she had now experienced. Mary said, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my savior; for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant."^{iv} She understood that if God could do this for her; God could do this for other people, who are poor, marginalized, and neglected. This was a message of profound hope and helps explain why Mary's song, The Magnificat, is perhaps one of the most beloved parts of the Morning and Evening Prayer services of our Book of Common Prayer. Mary's words emphasized God love for her and all other people and that God can and will bring meaning and purpose into everyone's life, if they are simply willing to respond like Mary to God's call in their life.^v

Let me tell you about another woman named Mary, whose life was dramatically transformed by God. She was a woman enslaved in America. When Mary was freed by the family that had enslaved her, they asked her what she wanted. Mary could not read or write, but she asked for a piece of land to build a church. Her request was granted and to this day, Mary's Chapel in Scotland Neck, North Carolina, still stands and has served generations of people.^{vi}

I wonder if this Mary's mother had heard the story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and had named her daughter Mary with the hope that her daughter too could have her fortunes in life reversed by the mighty power of God. If that was the case, then God did fulfill this mother's hopes and her daughter Mary was eventually freed from slavery and found great meaning in her life by building a church to share the Good News of the Gospel with others and to help them.

Both Marys had the courage and faith to believe that God was capable of transforming their lives in ways they could not even begin to imagine. In spite of their hardships, they had hope in all that God could make possible. We are living in a time in our nation when millions of people are experiencing unemployment, the suffering of hunger and homelessness, and the pain of losing loved ones to the dreadful coronavirus. They are longing for a reversal of their circumstances. They are longing for comfort, hope and joy in their lives.

If we are to follow the teaching of the great prophet Isaiah and his understanding of salvation, we are called to hear the cries of those who are suffering and respond with loving compassion to help them. We are called to bring hope and joy to people, who are struggling with doubt and fear.

In our parish, during the last nine months through the hard and dedicated work of fifteen church members, we were able to donate from our Garden for the Hungry more than 3,000 pounds of fresh vegetables to help people in need being served by the Madison County food banks and soup kitchens including the Berea Food Bank, St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Grace Now, God's Outreach, Hope's Wings, the New Liberty Family Shelter and St. Paul's AME Church. We also cooperated with other churches and the Islamic community in Richmond to provide lunches to homeless persons.

With the arrival of winter, we are now assisting in providing food, masks and hand sanitizer to homeless persons, who will be receiving shelter through the Room in the Inn program in Richmond during the next three months. Through this ministry, we

are able to serve as the hands and feet of Jesus to bring hope to people, who are struggling. We are able to bring the light of Christ to let them know that they are not forgotten and that they are loved by God and by us.

Let us pray. Shepherd of Israel, may Jesus, who is Emmanuel and son of Mary, be more than just a dream in our hearts. With the apostles, prophets, and saints, save us, restore us, and lead us in the way of grace and peace, that we may bear your promise into the world. Amen. ^{vii}

ⁱ Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Theological Perspective, p. 50.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 52.

^{iv} The Book of Common Prayer, p. 91.

^v Aisha Brooks-Lytle, "Mary's Song, Sunday, December 13, 2020, <https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5fc682e86615fb5c44000030/view>

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Revised Common Lectionary Prayers, alt., proposed by the Consultation on Common Texts (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), p. 34.