

Trusting God with Joy

Will you please pray with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

The topic for the third Sunday of Advent is joy. I don't know about you, but upon first reading of the Gospel lesson, joy may not seem like its topic. Before the part that we read for today, John the Baptist calls the entire crowd that came to be baptized a "brood of vipers." Then, as we read for today, he goes on to warn them that they need to repent, which means that they need to change how they are living and behaving. What does this story have to do with Christmas and with waiting for Jesus?

It's an important story because it reminds us what Jesus came for: He came to heal our broken world. Part of the way that he does that is by providing us with a script, stage directions, and then with a license to improvisation.

In his commentary on our Old Testament lesson for today, Rev. Adam Hearlson describes this process. He points out that the book of Isaiah tells us what we should be doing: On the day of our salvation, we will say thank you to our God, sing praises to God, and proclaim God's great works to the world. This verb, "You will say," is an imperative—meaning that it tells us what we must do. It's not a prophecy, but a command, a stage direction.

Hearlson goes on to say that, taken in the context of Advent, this stage direction reminds him of Christmas pageants, of the director quietly whispering to the children in the play, "Okay, now you say..." But we all know how Christmas pageants go, right? Our kids need to know their lines because their lines provide the structure of the play. But, basically, once they have said their lines, anything else can, and usually does, happen. And that's where the joy happens in the pageant.

Hearlson describes a wonderful story to illustrate this. He explains that, when he was teaching at a seminary, he organized a

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Christmas pageant of all 150 students, faculty, and staff. They cobbled together costumes and, as people arrived, allowed them to choose whatever party they wished. He describes it like this:

The President of the school donned a shepherd's robe. Three women professors put on the crowns of the Magi. We had three virgin Marys and only one Joseph. We had a camel costume that required two people, thus forcing someone to play the part of the camel rump. As everyone gathered in the chapel, I took the role of stage director. Prepared with my script, I told the Christmas story encouraging everyone to act out their parts.

With each movement of the story, I gently told each character, "And then you say..." As everyone played their part and felt comfortable in their role, they stopped taking my stage directions and started to enact the story themselves. Suddenly, without planning the donkey started dancing with the blessed virgin and within moments, the whole of the pageant decided to join them. The musician broke into "Go tell it on the Mountain," and without planning or foresight, on the eve of their finals, everyone danced and sang together. (Adam Hearlson, "Commentary on Isaiah 12:2-6, *Working Preacher* 2018).

Can you imagine this scene? The stage erupting with joy and laughter, the people spontaneously singing and dancing together?

I'm sure you can remember moments like this in our own worship services: Our own pageant last year when we gave families the Christmas script, and then they brought the stories alive with their own creativity, sending in videos that were beautiful and hilarious in their retelling. Or our pageant from two years ago, when we invited anyone in the sanctuary to play the roles from the Christmas story, and June chose the part of the angel.

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What Hearlson says learned from this event, was that stage directions and scripts are important. They give us a structure and help us know what to do. And once we're comfortable with our role, we can keep an open mind for the way the Holy Spirit will burst in, helping us improvise beyond the stage directions, and turning a scripted moment into joy. Those moments change the world because they are times when we can feel God's presence, and our doubts are replaced with hope and trust.

We can use this message to help us interpret the Gospel lesson. As we talked about last week, part of the healing of our world comes from our own reactions to the script Jesus gives us, our own prayers, our own thoughts, our own actions. In our Gospel story, when the crowd hears that they must repent, they ask for specific instructions: What should we do? We are all probably asking this same question of God right now: In the face of all the inequities in this world, in the face of pandemic and loss, what should we do? John the Baptist's answer is to say that, if people have privileges and wealth, they need to share it. If they have power, they need to make sure not to abuse it. In short, if they have power, privilege, or wealth, they need to use them for good and especially to support those most in need.

As Monica E Coleman has said, "John does not state that radical change is necessary for individuals and communities to experience God's justice. These are actually small, everyday things that can be done. This is seemingly modest transformation—share; don't abuse power. Yet these acts can help to issue justice in the world." As the writings of the Talmud remind us, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

This, partly, is what Jesus came for—to constantly remind us that, even in the face of enormous problems in our world, we *can* do something. In fact, we're obligated to do something. We can give

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money or our time to people who are hungry, who need housing, who need access to education and health care; we can give our money or our time to advocate for policies and legislation that reduces the wealth gap, that promote fair housing, that provide access to education and health care. We can get vaccinated, get our booster shots, and wear masks to protect the vulnerable and do our part to end this pandemic. But the script ends there, giving us the power to choose how to take these stage directions and turn them into actions that help others feel God's living, loving presence in the world.

I know that this might seem like such a small thing—I just do my part? How is that enough? But this, this is where I find joy in this story: To find out that I can do something; I am not powerless in the face of the problems in this world. I have been given a script I can trust, stage directions to guide me, and the Spirit of God that moves in and around me to help me improvise with creativity, spontaneity, humor, and trust. So let us go out into the world this week, trusting in God to help make our work as Christians a joy. Amen.