

Sermon 121513 'Listen, God is calling – Joy'  
Isaiah 35:1-10 Luke 1:46-55

Prayer: *God of joy, as we get closer and closer to Christmas, help us know the radical challenge you issued us and our world in the form of a baby. As we are inspired by a prophets visions and a young woman's joyful obedience, remind us how you guide our lives, no matter where we find ourselves. May we hear your Advent call of joy for all who chose your way home. Amen.*

'Listen, God is calling – Joy' because **joy** is God's gift to his people. God calls forth joy for us – from us no matter what life-situation or mess we are in. I have said before that happiness settles upon us- it comes from the outside – and for me it seems that it is generally caused by external circumstances. Joy is the gift of God that can be experienced no matter what is happening on the 'outside'.

And so on this Sunday we are asked to listen and reflect that God is calling 'Joy' from within the Christmas story for us. The particular parts to the Christmas story for us today are from the prophet Isaiah and Mary, the mother of Jesus through the writings of Luke and so for today they provide a frame for our reflections.

The first thought I'd offer is that 'joy' is both personal and communal. It flows from the individual out into the community – for all people and for the world, the whole of creation according to Isaiah. I think one of the 'God-dimensions' of a gift is that when God gives a gift; it is for the individual → **to share**; it is given in abundance and *without* any hidden 'strings' forcing the receiver to go back to the giver.

The receiver may go back – and with us, we know for ourselves we cannot live without being 'in-God', but we are not given gifts to force us back to God. Rather we are given gifts to make us better at going 'out' and into the world, with the Lord!

A second point is that for me "Joy" is not given in a vacuum but given in the middle of everything else that is going on. For Isaiah and his people it was exile, with the dream of returning 'home'... for Mary it was pre-marriage pregnancy, living amid Roman occupation, under Herod's rule... for us it is in an increasingly complex world of electronic wonders, multinational control, child poverty, population income gap increasing, a shrinking world capacity to nurture humanity.... Private challenges, income and health worries, friendship loss, time occupation use, parents! Or school results....

We don't live in isolation; we weren't made to, **so our faith** must be strong enough to guide us **realistically in every** situation we find ourselves in. One of the gifts of faith is joy- a capacity given to us that enables us to re-engage with ourselves, our community, our world in a positive, healthy and life generating manner. We may not be able to change the world – our community – our family's attitude to challenges, disruptions, terror, fear, brokenness... **any** of the horrors life throws at us, **but we can** begin within our very self. We can choose to have Joy as a default setting allowing God room to work within us – through us into the world. cv

So how does the Isaiah chapter given for us today offer guidance? The framework it places around 'Joy' the scholars tell us, is that we have to remember chapter 34 and chapter 35 are a 'unit'. You know how the chapters and verses of the Bible were basically a necessity of the printing press, well, today we heard chapter 35 –but its twin is 34. One describes the result of walking in the Lord's ways and the other describes what happens when God is rejected and not listened for / to.

Our chapter speaks into the time of restoration that was anticipated after the time of exile for God's people. As we read it the words themselves seem to leap for joy with the promise of salvation; healing; restoration; home in Jerusalem.... **The time of exile** for ancient Judah and Jerusalem (587-539 BCE) was a time of great **slaughter, deprivation, sighing and sadness** at the hands of the Babylonians.

Chapter 34 describes the other path humanity can tread in its relationship with God – away and out of the guidance of the Lord. This chapter is about the complete destruction of Edom because it **collaborated** with Babylon in the **devastation** of Judah leading up to the exile. The destruction as described in Isaiah 34 is **utterly comprehensive and final**. God has spoken; there will be **no resurrection** for Edom. This is contrasted in chapter 35 with those who trust the promises of God's salvation and discover the joy of his presence. cV

Joy – comes from the Lord, from walking in His path, **and** according to Isaiah; humanity's joys – the lame leaping, mutes shouting with joy, is inseparably tied to the joy of the land, so that water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert –unfertile land producing abundance.. and in the middle of this is a highway for the people of the Lord to walk 'home' on.

So as they trust God enough to walk in His ways- in the midst of the horror of the exile, they will be given their lives back. They will know restoration and truth of God's promises to be made real in them. **And as they walk home** to Zion, the Holy place of God, gladness and joy will overtake them... In the middle of all that was happening – despite all that was happening, they were promised 'joy'.

Joy is a gift – the people on the Lord's highway were promised it – and today we also hear how despite all that was happening, Mary experienced it. 'My spirit re-joices in the Lord', and so she moves into a most radical hymn of praise because the Lord has chosen her to be part of His Salvation, his healing purposes for all people and world; chosen her to be part of the keeping of His promises in restoring humanity to its rightful place in the divine order of life.

And what an order Mary tells us it is. Have you ever realised how dangerous this divine order of life that Mary sings about with such joy is? I found this in my reading: "John Ortberg observes in a December 2009 issue of **The Christian Century**, "New Testament scholar Scott McKnight notes that in the 1980s, the government of Guatemala banned this song" because, "[u]nlike 'Away in a Manger,' this prayer was apparently considered subversive, politically dangerous. Authorities worried that it might incite the oppressed people to riot." (K M-Huey)

Kate Matthews-Huey comments: "I remember hearing years ago that in the Latin American base communities, the people got to read the Bible themselves and heard in the Good News that God did not want their children to die of hunger and disease, or their husbands and sons to be disappeared, or their daughters brutalized by poverty. It seems that reading the Bible can put all sorts of dangerous ideas in people's heads. Maybe the governmental authorities of Guatemala were paying more attention than most of us do as we sing our hymns. They **certainly were** paying attention to Mary's hymn, as she rejoiced in seeing the Lord's the true order for living in the world. Cv

The Magnificat has been described as "a lovely expression of joy at God's promises kept, a celebration of the tables being turned, or overturned: the lowly are lifted up, the proud are brought down, and the hungry are fed. God remembers the people of Israel, and the promises God has made to them. What a powerful text for every heart hungry for good news at the end of another year of war, economic dislocation, and political strife!" (Kate M-Huey)

Mary sang in **joy** because she knew she was part of the Lord's plans for the right order of living. And this divine order theologian Sharon Ringe describes the righting of things, when all of God's children will have what they need, when the rich and the hungry, the lowly and the powerful "move toward a common middle ground." Is not Ringe's claim for Mary's time our dream, too? When "an economy marked by scarcity and competition is replaced by an economy of generosity in which **all have enough**"? (Luke, Westminster Bible Companion).

Have we enough courage to sing Mary's song – with joy, with the Lord as we walk home on His highway? Dare we listen to God's calling because once we have experienced His joy, we share? Amen.