

The Ax, the Tree, and the Wellspring

Isaiah 12: 2-6; Luke 3: 7-18

Isaiah 12: 2-6

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
God has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
And you will say on that day: Give thanks to the Lord,
call on God's name; make known God's deeds among the nations;
proclaim that the Lord's name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord, for God has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

This is a very short chapter in the otherwise voluminous book of the prophet Isaiah. As short as it is, the song bursts into joyous praise. It is a joyous witness of one who is secure in her trust of God's mighty work of salvation, and her joy is infectious. The joy of the one who declared "Surely God is my salvation" and drew living water from the well of salvation grows into the joy of a community, who, on that day, in fullness of time, come together to give thanks and bear witness to God's wonderful work among all peoples. Together they shout aloud and sing for joy, for God is in their midst as their strength and their salvation.

A nice piece of the Scripture for the Third Sunday of Advent when we light the candle to contemplate Joy.

And yet, you know what's strange? I said this chapter is short, only 6 verses long, and yet, the lectionary cycle omitted the verse 1 from the "reading" assigned for today. That's right, you heard only 5 verses, beginning with verse 2 "Surely God is my salvation" ... sorry but that's not how Isaiah began this very short chapter. I got curious why the lectionary skipped verse 1? What about it they didn't think it "fit" the theme of Joy on this 3rd Advent Sunday?

I'll let you in on it. Here is the verse 1 with which Isaiah began this joyous song of praise: "You will say on that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me."

Oh, "anger." I get it. The lectionary planners were perhaps all too aware that many of us are allergic to the "angry, judgmental, punishing, cranky, hard-to-please, severe image of God"

and did not want to introduce “anger” in this otherwise happy song of praise. We believe in God of Love. Fire and Brimstone? No Thank you. It is true many of us have been hurt by one-sided image of an angry God.

And yet, Isaiah began his song of joy with an acknowledgement of God’s anger, at us. Isaiah knew, our joy in God that prompts us to thank God, begins with our remembering “those days” when God was less than pleased with us.

Yes, we do believe in God of Love, and a fierce love at that; God’s love is like that of the mamma bear watching over her cubs. When her children are exposed to harm, her anger is as fierce as her love. She would pursue her enemy and would not relent.

So also, God’s anger turns on anyone or anything that harm God’s beloved, us creatures as well as the Creation. Sometimes, we are the ones who suffer hurt and are wounded at the hand of others. Other times, we are the ones who inflict the harm on others, knowingly or unknowingly. And if we are honest, we can remember those times we caused harm to others, and for every instance we can remember, there must be many others we were and are unaware.

In our youth, we learn life’s important lessons, too often only after having hurt someone we love. Then later, we grow up and some of us become parents, often imperfect parents, acting in a way that doesn’t always help our children. We don’t always make good choices; we are nearsighted and act in self-interest, we let greed have more say in our decision than we’d like to admit.

These dynamics play out in all different kinds of relationships we have with our fellow human creatures, our families and friends and even with strangers, whom we’ve never met but are nonetheless part of the complex web of the broken social system we’re all part of, not to mention what we’ve done to the natural world as God’s creation: the ocean, the river, the forests and the air...And God is angry whenever we harm God’s beloved creation. God’s anger, then, is a flip side, the other face, of God’s love for us. God’s angry for our sake.

Well, that’s a dilemma, isn’t it? God loves our very imperfect, very human selves, who are bound to hurt God’s creation and cause God to grieve. But Isaiah here in verse 1 reminds us that the same God who was angry turned from anger and comforted us, and became our strength, our might, our Salvation. This is the reason for our joy.

God’s answer to this dilemma, too, was God’s love, the loving-kindness in Hebrew called Hessed. John Calvin, the forebearer of our Reformed Christian faith pointed out this as the

biblical truth: The faithful ascribe mercy to God and expect God's mercy; they know that God's chastisement will not prevent God's compassion; they anticipate individual attention of joy and comfort." God in God's compassion turn anger away, even though it hurts God to watch us hurt one another and ourselves.

God's anger as a manifestation of God's Love, while God's love being there before God's anger, and it is God's love, not anger, that endures forever. This is the wellspring of salvation from which we joyfully draw living water. For Isaiah, a reason to shout aloud and sing for joy.

With this image of God whose deep love for us shows up in the form of anger, let us now listen to John the Baptist, another prophet who kinda sounds angry.... Remember last week, John was proclaiming the repentance for the forgiveness of sins, repentance meaning, changing one's mind by expanding it to embrace a new vision, to be released from the old way of living, which is forgiveness.

Luke 3: 7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'

And the crowds asked him, 'What then should we do?' In reply he said to them, 'Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.' Even tax-collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, 'Teacher, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.' Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what should we do?' He said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation and be satisfied with your wages.'

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.' So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

John the Baptist does sounds kinda angry when he calls the crowd "the brood of vipers," baby snakes with a potential to grow into deadly snakes. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is the religious leaders John calls "the brood of vipers," but in Luke, it is the "crowd," that is, all who

had come there to be baptized, not just the religious leaders. We are all called to the new way of being.

And John questions the sincerity of their motives for coming to be baptized, challenging to ask ourselves what it is we think we are doing. John is saying, if you think you could escape the judgment of God's anger, just by going through the motion of getting baptized, you're wrong. Some people who are ambivalent about God and faith would get baptized, just to be on the safe side; no, it doesn't work that way. Not even being Abraham's descendants, that is, belonging to the right kind of people, won't make any difference before God.

John's baptism by water was a sign of repentance that leads to forgiveness, leaving behind the world's standard of "good living" and to turn towards God, expanding one's mind and seeking to live by God's standard. And a person who has thus "turned around" is a "forgiven" person, released from the from the old ways of living a life limited to self-interest and controlled by greed, so you are free to act in a new way, the way of generosity, compassion, honesty, and justice, loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself.

When "repentance for forgiveness" is available, judgment is good news, because Judgment of God is God's "No," utter rejection of anything that harms us, including what we do to each other and to ourselves. And the "repentance for forgiveness" is not only always available but God is inviting us into it every moment. In other words, every moment is a moment of judgment. John the Baptist is just reminding us, the ax is lying at the root of the trees to cut down fruitless trees. Because God in God's compassion would not allow what hurts us to survive. AND the song of Isaiah also reminds us that God in God's compassion has become our salvation, and we can draw living water from the wellspring of God's salvation, so our tree bear fruits.

We are the Tree standing with God's judgment of Ax lying at our roots, and those very roots reaching out to draw the living water from the ever-flowing spring of God's salvation, that we may bear fruits. So, rejoice and be glad that the ax is there, ready to cut away and throw into fire what you would leave behind in repentance. Rejoice and be glad that God is in our midst as the ever-flowing wellspring from which we can draw water. Christ is our Salvation, the ever-flowing fountain from which we can draw water. Christ, the living water quenches our thirst. Connected to Christ, we can bear fruits. It is this Christ whose birth long ago we celebrate on Christmas, and it is this Christ whose coming again we await this Christmas. Amen.