

Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, Psalm 146:4-9, Matthew 11:2-11

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

If you have been an Episcopalian for a while, you are undoubtedly familiar with the liturgy of our church. You know that no matter which Episcopal church you are worshipping in, there will be a familiar routine. The service will have readings from the Old and New Testament, we will say the Nicene or Apostles Creed, we will pray together, confess our sins against God and each other, and if the service has Holy Eucharist we will share in the sacred meal of communion. There may be a choir present to enhance the worship with anthems and choral responses. We may or may not join in the singing of hymns.

One of the things many find comforting about the Episcopal Church is the familiarity of that liturgy, feeling we can worship in any part of the country (the world even) and we will feel at home.

Every year at Advent we rotate to one of 3 tables of the lectionary - that is code for the verses we read from the Bible each week. We have, again, just begun year A. What that means for us as listeners is the gospel we will hear from the most throughout this year is Matthew.

In addition to following the lectionary, the Episcopal Church designates multiple seasons of the year. Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost. We follow these seasons over and over again, year after year with the hope that each time we celebrate a moment in the story of God, we will have an opportunity to see something in a new light. Even though we have heard a particular Bible verse before, perhaps today, given the circumstances we find ourselves in, we will hear it differently than we did in the past. Possibly this time, as we hear a homilist, or we sing a hymn, we will find new meaning.

The intent of this repetition is that we will be drawn closer to God, that we will be transformed through our corporate worship and that we will leave this sacred space and live out lives so filled with the Holy Spirit that we cannot help but spread the Good news of Christ Jesus to the world.

Just as we have for the past 2 weeks, we began our service by lighting the Advent wreath. The wreath is made of evergreens, signifying continuous life. Its shape is circular - with no beginning or end, symbolizing the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the everlasting life we find in Christ. There is one candle for each of the 4 Sunday's in Advent. Three of the candles are violet or blue as ours are - a liturgical color that signifies prayer, penance and sacrifice. Today, for the first time this year we lit the rose candle. It signals that we have reached the midpoint of Advent.

This Sunday is Gaudete Sunday - which is the latin term for rejoice. We can rejoice because Jesus is coming soon!

Isaiah prophesied that when the Messiah came there would be such abundance that even “the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.”¹ When this day comes the “waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert, the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.”¹

Isaiah told of a time when all would be filled with joy and singing. He declared that weak hands and feeble knees would be strengthened. That blind eyes would open and deaf ears would be unstopped. He proclaimed there would be joy and gladness, that sorrow and sighing would flee away.

The prophet Isaiah was believed to have lived around 700 years prior to the birth of Jesus. Yet his powerful imagery can have relevance in our modern world.

As I heard this passage this week, I kept returning to the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. What if our blindness is our inability to see another’s point of view? What if what we are deaf to is a voice that is counter to our own? We often perceive ourselves as possessing a particular trait, when in truth, others find us lacking that attribute.

Perhaps, this reading for us at St. James’ this year is inviting us to self introspection. What is God calling us to next? Who are we as individual children of God and as a collective congregation? How can we navigate this highway “called the Holy Way”¹?

St. James’ has been my spiritual home for over 25 years. I am grateful for all of the folks who have answered God’s call to shepherd us to be the best church we can be. Each of them has shared their unique gifts and their faith and their vision for who we can become. Each of them has touched our lives and the lives of those who came before us.

I love this church. While I wish that we were more racially diverse, I am grateful for the diversity we do have. I appreciate that we hold varying political views and we come from a broad spectrum of socio-economic levels.

I love the fact that some of us are cradle Episcopalians and some of us came to this tradition later in life. I am delighted that we have parishioners who have been here for many, many years, and those who are new to our parish. I feel I am a part of the family of St. James. And like all families we are complicated.

Some days this family challenges each other, and some days this family lifts one another up. Some days this family has disagreements and other days this family works together for a single purpose.

I do not know what our future holds, but I believe with all my heart that God has plans for each of us.

So today, I invite you to rejoice my friends! Rejoice, for the birth of the Savior is close at hand!

God is with us in our uncertainty, or our anger; in our sorrow, or our anticipation. The coming birth of Jesus is a renewed opportunity for us to see through eyes filled with compassion, rather than judgement, to listen deeply to one another, to the world around us and to God. And most importantly, a renewed opportunity to love one another and gently hold each other in grace.

“Be strong, do not fear!”¹ God will come and save us! Rejoice!

¹ NRSV Bible Isaiah 35:1-10