

The Third Sunday in Advent 2022
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

Advent is a time of anticipation. A time of eager waiting, of patient waiting, of apprehensive waiting. We are awaiting the coming of God into our hearts and live, into our personal lives and into the life of the world. The Church calls us to wait, calls us in that waiting, to be alert and to prepare and on this third Sunday of the season, to rejoice. In one of Paul's most quoted lines, 'Gaudete – rejoice in the Lord always'. (Philippians)

How we wait, what we watch for, and how we prepare depends greatly on our expectations. These expectations are formed on the basis of history: what has happened to us in the past, what has happened to people we know, what has happened to the people of God in ages past and what visions people have had of the activity and promise of God.

If we put together today's reading from the prophecy of Isaiah with the one we heard last week, we have a very compelling and optimistic vision of the activity of God in the world, of the will of God for us and for all of creation. This is an image of harmony, of ultimate reconciliation among all created beings, an image of healing of individuals and of relationships. In this context it makes sense that our waiting be joyful, not fearful, that part of our preparation is rejoicing in the promises.

Last week we heard the prophet's description of the Peaceable Kingdom, with predator and prey enjoying one another's company, eating and playing and resting together in mutual confidence and security. This vivid image of ultimate harmony and peace among all that have breath is one of the most popular sources of images for Christmas cards, because it evokes the complete, healing peace that we all instinctively long for – especially the lion and lamb pictures.

Today Isaiah offered us more about peace and reconciliation. Today we heard that it is not only the breathing creations that will rejoice in harmony, but even the plants and the very land itself. All will be in harmony and nothing will any longer be a source of danger or fear, or even discomfort, for the people of God. The prophet goes on to speak of signs of healing, not just in relationships, but in individuals. The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame leap, and the mute speak. All that keeps anyone from full participation in the wonders of God's creation is done away. Everyone is whole and the world is wholly wonderful.

These are images of Shalom, the right ordering of all things, the peace which is God's ultimate will for creation. They are images of joy, without pain or destruction or fear. All that is, is good. All animosity, all that separates person from person, being from being, vanishes. This is the original portrayal of the saying, "All is right with the world."

This image of what God intends for us and for all has inspired Christian visionaries down the millennia. This vision is what many of us hold in our hearts, giving us the determination to work in our world to make it conform more closely to what former Presiding Bishop Katherine Jefferts Schori likes to call the 'dream of God'.

Our particular expectations of what God will do, of what constitutes God's Shalom, determines how we wait – and whether that waiting is characterized by rejoicing. If we were like most first century Palestinians, expecting a mighty, military conflict in which we would fight alongside the hosts of Heaven until all of the forces of evil were obliterated, we would probably be on the lookout for strong military leaders and prepare ourselves in a sort of perpetual bootcamp, so that we would be physically rugged and ready, supplied with arms and the skill to use them. We would be careful to ascertain which people were on God's side and which were not, discriminating carefully with whom to associate. This would be a preparation of hypervigilance and anxiety, not rejoicing.

On the other hand, if Isaiah's images of universal healing and harmony inform our expectations, then our waiting will be quite different. This is not an advent of divine power which requires armaments, or mutual suspicion, or great physical rigor. This does, however, suggest spiritual and emotional rigor. If God's will for us involves healing of our selves and our relationships and our world, then it is logical for us to prepare by breaking down barriers, by finding healing we can bring about ourselves, by being alert for signs of healing and harmony as ways to recognize God coming into our lives, and by looking forward with joy.

It can be very difficult to turn enemies into friends, to be, so far as it lies with us, at peace with everyone. It takes extraordinary discipline not to cast some unholy or hostile people into the outer darkness of “them”, the people who are not “us” and therefore are not worthy to be part of our harmony. But recall what Isaiah has shown us about lions, and even vipers and asps. In God’s plan, all are meant to be one. In God’s Shalom, there is no ‘them’, only an all-inclusive ‘us’. As children of God we are called to find ways to live as though this were already true – and to rejoice in the opportunity.

Of course, as with anything else in our calling as God’s children, this requires God’s help. Researchers tell us that humans have an innate suspicion of those who are not like them, that this us-them division is in our basic nature. It is only with the grace of God that we learn to see that everyone is like us, a child of God in need of God’s grace and love. God’s love active in our hearts can make them grow like the Grinch’s heart until they are at last large enough to embrace all whom God created for us to love.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus challenges John the Baptist to recognize the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God by just those signs we heard from Isaiah today: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” Healing comes from God and as God comes to us we are told to expect healing, we are told to watch for healing. Of course, God’s time is not easily calculated. Sometimes a great deal of patience is required to receive and recognize the healing that God offers us. Sometimes the healing is not in the form that we have planned or requested, but always God comes “with healing in his wings” and we rejoice.

We are also called, as God’s own people, to bring healing, to be healers ourselves of the destruction and brokenness we find in the world, whether it is by comforting those in pain, by guiding the lost, or by the kind of feeding, clothing, and visiting which mends the isolation and injustice of many lives. We are not called to wait for God to fix everything, while we watch. Our patience is required in being willing to wait for the results of our work. We are called to feed the hungry whom we can and not despair because we have not ended world hunger. We are called to visit the lonely or imprisoned whom we can, and not despair that we have not cured all the loneliness in the world. Mother Teresa used to talk about the work of her sisters as mere drops of water in the bucket that was needed to take care of everyone in need, but she reminded them that they were only called to offer their own drops and that with those drops God could fill the whole bucket.

And so we call God to come among us with might, not the might of an army to topple all the despots of our world, but with that unique might which alone can bring peace to our hearts and to our world, which alone can give us the wisdom and strength to be instruments of divine peace, and which alone can bring the healing and harmony for which the creation is destined. It is a joy to me to see the welcome Saint Aidan’s offers to the hungry who come here seeking food, to other communities seeking a place to gather, to one another in times of struggle. This consistent welcome is a definite sign of God’s healing love in the world and a great occasion of rejoicing.

Most gracious and loving God, whose will it is that all pain and destruction should be no more and that all your creation exist in harmony, rejoicing in your love, grant us eyes to see and hands to help, that we may see your love at work in the world about us and also see the work that you have for our hands and hearts to do; make our minds alert and our hearts eager that each day we might draw closer to the realization of your Shalom.
Amen, come Lord Jesus.