

“A Message of Advent Joy”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 12, 2021

3rd Sunday of Advent

Rev. John Wahl

Isaiah 55:1-13

In the early hours of this morning, long before the sun began to rise, the stars shone brightly against a clear, black sky. The air was crisp, quiet, and still: without a breath of wind. What a contrast from twenty-four hours prior, when – on a warm, tumultuous night in Kentucky, where I was staying with my mother – I could hear torrents of rain falling from storm clouds and wind ripping through leafless trees. The television weather forecasters repeated tornado watches and warnings for dozens of counties and described the cells forming south and west of us and early reports of large debris fields.

It would not be until daylight broke and pictures began coming in that we understood the over 200-mile path of destruction the storms had carved; eventually passing about thirty miles south of where I had been sleeping: of cars picked up and tossed, buildings collapsed, towns destroyed, and dozens of lives feared or confirmed lost. Not since April of 1974 had anything approaching this storm hit my home state; that time bouncing over and through many of Louisville’s neighborhoods, including the one where my mother now lives, flattening thousands of homes, killing 63. Though just shy of five years old at the time, I can still remember driving the next day to that neighborhood to check on friends; parking in the shopping center across the street, then walking over and under the massive trees fallen across the road, carrying food and supplies; finally arriving at their house and seeing the winds had completely sheared off the roof and second story of their home.

How do you recover when so much life and property has been lost? How do you rebuild from so much destruction? From where will all the necessary resources come? And, how do you reckon the fact that one town, one neighborhood, even one house might be flattened while the one next to it remains standing?

In today’s vision from chapter 55 of Isaiah, we have come to the time of the end of the decades-long destruction of the Babylonian exile. Many, if not most, of the exiles have been born not in Israel, but in a foreign nation; having only heard stories about the Promised Land and its long-gone capital of Jerusalem. The prophet announces that God still has a mighty task for them to fulfill; namely, to be “a light to the nations in order that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah

49:6) These people could barely light their own homes, let alone become a light to other nations, including those who had decimated their own land.¹

Through the voice of the prophet, God summons these exiled people – their homes and cities destroyed – to come, eat, and drink; to fill themselves with good things – bare necessities and luxurious delicacies alike – without cost. Though the people had lost everything, and then scraped and struggled to regain even a little, God now says they will be given all these things for free. No longer are they reserved for the rich, the powerful, or the captors; all are invited and welcomed. God implores them to listen and remember the ancient promises made with Israel; that in this day, they would be fulfilled. With God, all things are possible.²

“My plans aren’t your plans, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my plans than your plans.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

In this season of Advent, we remember the joy that has already and is again coming into the world. This is not our way, but God’s way; it will not be based on what we can see around us or imagine, but according to God’s mysterious plans. We are invited not to spend our money – and neither energy nor spirit – on those things that will not give us nourishment, but, instead, to be hope for the nations; to become reflections of the light of God’s generosity, mercy, and justice.

No matter our present circumstances – that which we can now see and imagine – we are called to travel forth in celebration. Even the mountains will sing, the trees will clap their hands. Whether the night is dark and stormy or bright and still, God has a plan for us, God will show us a way forward. It may not be according to the schedule or in the manner we expect, but the time will come when God’s ancient promise to Israel will be fulfilled: the day of shalom will dawn.

And so we come to eat and drink and listen, we share what we have and teach what we know, we look forward with hope; and we rejoice, for God has come – and is coming soon – to be among us. Amen.

¹ John Holbert from *Patheos.com*

² Alistair Roberts, “The Politics of God’s Plenty”