

## Scripture and Sermon - December 11, 2016

### Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For 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; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.

And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

## **Matthew 11:2-11**

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Let us pray...Amen.

This morning's Hebrew scripture from the prophet Isaiah was written at a time when the people of Israel were returning to their homeland after a period of exile. Images of repair, rebuilding, images of hope and good news abound.

The prophet was speaking to a people who had endured punishment for their transgressions, a people who hungered and thirsted for justice and righteousness, a people ready to make good on a new covenant so that they could put their sins behind them. They were a people ready, willing, and able to rebuild the temple, the symbol of their faith, the symbol of their relationship with God.

But this isn't the only time this passage is quoted in the bible. Jesus quotes Isaiah to give his listeners an idea of why he was put here on earth. He himself takes responsibility for being the anointed one, for being the one sent to share the good news to the oppressed, for being the one to release the captives, for being the one to bind up the broken hearted...

And for a short time, about 3 years, Jesus did exactly that: he shared the good news of God's forgiveness, he proclaimed the radical idea that God loved all of God's children, even those who didn't even know God. And for that, he angered powers that be. His ministry, his life among us was ended because he threatened the status quo, he turned things upside down with his healing, with his forgiving, with his parables and miracles.

With his ascension to heaven, Jesus left God's children, but he didn't leave us without resources, and he didn't leave us alone. Jesus lives among us in our own faith lives.

In the Christ's absence, and until the Messiah comes again, *we* are the ones who are to share the good news. *We* are the ones who are to act on our faith, to act in His place. *We* are the descendants that shall be known among the nations, with *our* offspring among the peoples; we are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

But wait a minute: we don't know the first thing about being a prophet. Except that the world doesn't treat them very well. Why would we want to draw attention to ourselves by riling up the masses...or the powers that be. We can see how that turned out for the other prophets, especially Jesus.

Well, I don't think we're called to overthrow the governments, but I do think that when we share the good news, we are fulfilling our end of our covenant with God. That there is even good news to share is a good sign these days. Though we may be challenged to find it, though our voices may be too quiet to be heard over the roar of modern life, we are the designated good news sharers of the day!

Lost in the ocean of tragedy and injustice, there are stories of literal good news that point to God's loving and healing presence: last week, it was discovered that a healthy pod of humpback whales have been congregating in the waters just off the Statue of Liberty. It's been hundreds of years since a significant population of whales populated those waters. It's good news for the whales, it's good news for the environment, and it's good news for us.

Rock station WMMR's co-hosts Preston & Steve lived in an XFINITY Live parking lot from November 28th through December 2nd with the goal of encouraging listeners to donate food to 'Philabundance', an organization dedicated to feeding the city's hungry. The appeal ended up raising 1.3 million pounds – over 683 tons – of non-perishable food items, representing the largest amount in the event's history, dating back to 1998. The final total ended up beating last year's total by over 100 tons.

Over the last five years, San Francisco's Presiding Judge John Stewart and his colleagues have dismissed over 66,000 arrest warrants for quality-of-life crimes, such as sleeping on the sidewalk.

His logic? People living in poverty do not deserve to be put in jail just because they're too poor to pay a fine.

Typically when an offender is cited for a violation, they are expected to pay \$200 in fines or more. However, since most of the offenders are homeless, they usually fail to show in court which can be punishable by up to five nights in prison. Instead of approving the arrest warrants for failure to show up in court, Judge Stewart and his colleagues have dismissed thousands.

San Francisco judges are reportedly being encouraged to cite treatment and rehabilitation options rather than fines, though court officials have been receiving criticism for dismissing the crimes in the first place.

Judge Stewart, however, told SF Gate that though the people have a right to be upset, he and his colleagues do not plan on enforcing punishment against the homeless population, saying "it's the right thing to do."

In our Advent traditions, we light candles each week to represent different aspects of the coming Messiah. Today's candle represents love (joy). And who are the ones who are to share that love (joy) today? We are.

The good news for today is that we can comfort someone who is struggling, even if we ourselves are struggling. We can advocate for justice, even if we ourselves have experienced injustice at the hands of others. We ourselves can begin to repair, rebuild, raise up that which has been torn down, even if we have experienced devastation in our lives. And if we have not experienced those things, if we have been blessed to avoid much struggle, to avoid most injustice, to avoid much devastation, then how much more capable are we to share the good news?

If the prophet Isaiah predicted it, and John the Baptist prepared for it, and Jesus embodied it, we are called to continue it. What is it, you ask? The sharing of the good news, that God loves all of God's children, and forgives us when we ask for forgiveness. The sharing of God's love for all of God's children, even if they have done us harm, even if they scare us because they look differently than we do...

If ever there was a time to pull out our garments of salvation from the closet, it's now. If ever there was a time to put on our robes of righteousness, it's now. Will we stand out in the midst of those who are clothed in commercialism, or racism, or whatever 'ism' happens to tickle their fancy? Absolutely. But as Christians, we must have come to understand by now that our faith will sometimes cause us to stand out.

If we start looking for the good news, the literal kind and the symbolic kind, and if we insist on sharing it, we're going to stand out. Like the scientists who advocated for cleaner water off the shore of NY City, like the officer who helped feed a woman and her family in need, like 4 year old Owen Walker, choosing to help others instead receiving presents for

himself...see, they advocated for a better world, they acted on their faith, but you didn't know about them until today.

The actions we take in our faith lives, on a personal level, make a difference. We won't get in the news, but we will *be the good news*. We are called to be the good news of the day. Not for the glory of it, but because it's what God expects of us.

My challenge to each of us today, is to see if we can find a way to be the good news for someone, to be the love of God for someone, not because we'll get credit for it, but because it's what God calls us to do when we love the Lord.

Jesus doesn't walk among us anymore, but he walks within each of us. We can't look to the Messiah to do these things, we have to be the ones to do them.

Isaiah wasn't the Messiah, John the Baptist wasn't the Messiah, we aren't the Messiah. Jesus came among us, and fulfilled his purpose of sharing the good news with those who love the Lord. And it's our job to keep on sharing, to actually *be* the good news to those in need, to those in prison, to those who are oppressed, to those with broken hearts. Even if we are, or have been in prison, even if we have been oppressed, or done the oppressing, even if our hearts are broken. The simple math of Advent tells us that Hope, plus Peace, plus Love equals Joy, the joy of the coming of the Messiah. And after the celebration of the Messiah's birth has passed, we will be left not alone, not without resources, but left to share the good news, the love of God with others.

Each of us is, in some way, the Good News. All we have to do now is find a way to share it with others. I'll leave that up to you, while I figure out my own way of sharing, and then let's meet up next week and see how much better the world is. Amen.