A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*Rejoicing in Darkness*

Isaiah 35, Matthew 11

December 15, 2019

The third Sunday of Advent is designated as rejoicing Sunday. The journey isn’t over yet, but it’s on the way, anticipation builds. We’re on the way, and we’re getting closer every day. Rejoice, rejoice. The light has not come yet, but even in the darkness, rejoice. Your God is here. Rejoice.

Sometimes easier said than done.

*Where* is God in this? She sat on the chair in my study and asked that question out loud. I was quiet, not sure at all she was actually asking me for an answer. She was asking the room, God, herself, the ether. Where is God in this? She’s hardly the only one to have asked.

It doesn’t take many years of living before the question visits even the most faithful believers. Life’s troubles have a way of bringing people into darkness, the place where hope smolders and despair grows. In those times, the *most* faithful ask the question: where is God in all this? Everyone else has just given up asking.

It’s to John the Baptist’s everlasting crown of faith that he sent his disciples to ask Jesus just that sort of question, whether Jesus was really the one they’d been waiting for or not. It’s not a failure of John’s faith, it’s a sign of it. John’s in prison for doing and saying what he’d done and said all along, but this time he got on the wrong side of unjust power. He’s in prison, for doing what’s right. John was the first to declare Jesus the messiah they’d been waiting for. But now, what? What’s changed? Herod’s still on the throne; Romans still patrol the streets, and I’m sitting here in prison instead of sleeping out under the stars in the wild by the river. Go find him, John tells through the bars to one of his followers. Find Jesus and ask him: Jesus, the darkness is closing in, where is the light? Where is God in all of this?

Over the years I’ve sat with a lot of people going through a lot of dark valleys, including prison, both metaphorically and also, all too real. No two valleys are the same and each one seems endlessly deep to the one going through it and the way out seems impossibly steep. As Chuck Poole said, “the evidence for despair is so great. Life, after all, has filled our mouths with a litany of words that belong more to the vocabulary of fear than to the language of hope.”[[1]](#footnote-1) To turn one of Chuck’s phrases, it can be a little hard to spell rejoice from the same alphabet that makes words like Alzheimer’s, anxiety, biopsy, divorce, funeral, addiction, and war.

It can be hard to spell rejoice, or God for that matter, from the same alphabet as prison, and that’s where John found himself physically and existentially. “The greatest man ever born to woman,” according to Jesus, the Messenger to prepare the way of the Lord, the prophet and more than a prophet . . .reduced to darkness and questions: where is God in all of *this*?

Unless we just give up our faith, we will each knock into this question somewhere along the path in a dark valley of life.

Are you the one, John asked? Jesus had an answer. Tell him…

blind receive their sight…

lame walk…

lepers are cleansed…

the deaf hear…

the dead are raised…

and the poor have good news brought to them…

Well, this is something, right? The whole idea of a messiah coming had started to seem like pretty old-fashioned doctrine to a lot of people living under Roman rule, but this man Jesus, in flesh and blood and spirit and power... could he be the one, the one they used to say was coming as the Messiah, the Son of God, to save us from our sin and from our suffering and oppression? Jesus’ good works had already touched the hearts of many people. Indeed, many people followed Jesus because he did so many of these miraculous, good things for them and their loved ones. By this time Jesus had gathered quite a following of people who were in awe for what he did and hung on the words he said. They loved his deeds and they loved his words. Mostly they loved the hope he gave them.

All of this while John the Baptizer was caged in a cell. We see clearly the crossing trajectories of faith. The faith of the crowds following Jesus was increasing. The faith of John in jail was teetering. They started out doubting him and were starting to believe. John started out boldly declaring his belief in Jesus’ identity, and now, he’s wavering.

The one on the up escalator wondering how much better this can get shows a certain kind of faith. The one falling down the hole, wondering whether there’s a bottom, still asking “where is god in this?” shows another kind of faith. Are you really the One? The question is not doubt, but faith, real faith, heartfelt, clinging to whatever it can on the way down. It can be hard to hold on to a dimming light of faith when the darkness closes in.

The response Jesus gives is more than it appears. It looks like Jesus offers miracles as some kind of proof. Are you the one? Well, look what I can do. That wouldn’t be the worst argument, but there’s something even more going on here. What Jesus says is quoted almost directly from a time in Israel’s historic experience of darkness searching for light, any light, any assurance that God is still good, life is worth living, and the future will be redeemed.

What Jesus tells John, as John would have known very well, is right from Scripture. John would have immediately recognized that in his response Jesus was pointing him to Isaiah 35, written in a dark time to people living in despair. Isaiah 35 says in part, “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame man shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute shall sing for joy.” Isaiah’s exuberant vision is that human weakness will turn to strength; those living in darkness and despair shall see and hear, and leap, and sing. When they do, they will be joining the praise of all creation that’s already making a holy ruckus. All creation rejoices: the wilderness, the dry land, and the desert shall be glad, it will blossom and rejoice with praise and singing. As Isaiah’s words played in John’s mind, he understood what Jesus meant.

John is afraid and in despair. Isaiah is addressing people who are afraid and in despair. They are described as having ‘a fearful heart.” But the literal translation is better: a fast-beating heart--a racing heart. Say to those with trembling knees, with weak hands, with a racing heartbeat: “Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God!”

John, in the darkness, would have heard all of this play in his mind. Jesus message is not only about his identity but John’s spirit: Be strong, do not fear, here is your God! Opening eyes, unstopping ears, strengthening legs, unloosing tongues of praise. Even the wilderness you know so well, even the wilderness is coming to life again.

But just as important as these evidences of the messiah’s ministry is what is missing from Isaiah 35 and missing from Jesus’ answer to John.

Ministries of the messiah are listed in Isaiah 35 and similarly also in Isaiah 61, but they’re different. Isaiah is this massive book, maybe the biggest in all the Bible. 66 chapters. The first 39 chapters, 1-39 are mostly prophesies of judgment with the exception of the exuberant vision of hope in Chapter 35 which stands out like an oasis in a desert, or a candle in the storm. It was a storm. In the 8th century BC, the massive Assyrian army is preparing to invade, and everyone can see what’s coming. Their coming is, at least in part, according to Isaiah, a judgment from God on your sins. The darkness is closing in. You will get what you deserve. But so will they in their time. All the nations of the world will get what they deserve. In Isaiah’s vision, God’s judgments are righteous and pure, and they are coming. The world is dark and is getting darker and this is a direct divine response to human idolatry, injustice, and sinfulness. Chapter 34 is particularly poignant, “Draw near, O nations, to hear, and give attention, all peoples! Let the earth hear and all that fills it: the world, and all that comes from it. For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their host; he has devoted them to destruction and given them over for slaughter.” The tiny neighboring nation of Edom stands in for all the nations here in this warning: “the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch and her soil into sulfur. . .from generation to generation it shall lie waste, none shall pass through it forever and ever.”

In Isaiah’s relentless vision, God will bring vengeance and restorative justice to lands enriching themselves off the suffering of other people. This is much of what is in the first 39 chapters of Isaiah. Israel will suffer. All will suffer. Chapter 40 begins a new phase in the book. For 15 chapters and much of the rest of Isaiah, the tone changes. God’s anointed one is coming; the section opens “Comfort, comfort my people says your God, speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare has ended, her iniquity is pardoned. . .. In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” That’s John the Baptist language there. For the rest of Isaiah, the message is: the suffering is over; the new day is dawning, the light is chasing away the darkness. We have come through the worst of it and now we are made whole.

In all the years Isaiah’s prophesies span, Israel was attacked by Assyria and then Babylon and carried away into exile. And then in time they returned home. So, in history you see the structure of Isaiah played out on the life of the nation. Darkness descending, then destruction. Out of the destruction comes a glimmer of hope and comfort, then return and renewal and rejoicing. Chapters 1-39 are the judgment; Chapter 40-66 are the restoration. Darkness and light, downward and upward.

What I want us to see is that what Jesus tells John almost sounds like it’s from this very last part of Isaiah, it’s so close that you miss it if you’re not listening carefully. If you’re not really paying attention, it sounds like what Jesus is saying to John is drawn from chapter 61, the part of Isaiah that is at the ending, when the darkness has long passed and the new day has dawned and all is light and joy.

In Chapter 61, Isaiah reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prison to those who are bound, and declare the year of the Lord’s favor.” In the opening of Luke’s gospel, that’s the passage Jesus reads in the synagogue and then says, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus could have used the words of Isaiah 61 in his answer to John. And I can’t shake that loose. I can’t shake loose the punch that Jesus did not quote to John in prison the part of Isaiah where the messiah frees those who are in prison. Instead of quoting from Isaiah 61, which Jesus knows how to do, to tell John everything is alright and he’s going to be alright, Jesus quotes from much earlier when everything isn’t already alright. Everything is not alright--not yet. If you’re going to rejoice, you’re going to do it knowing that the darkness may not yet be over. If you’re going to sing, you’re going to sing ahead of time. Sing anyway. John’s imprisonment embodies that reality just as much as his baptism embodied hope.

We’re not in a redeemed world in which everything’s ok. Not yet.

We’re still in a world where bad things happen, and darkness falls.

We’re not in an Isaiah 61 world.

But we are in an Isaiah 35 world. That at least, is something to rejoice.

Chapter 35 in the vast span of Isaiah is an oasis in the desert, a candle lit on a dark, dark night. For 39 chapters the darkness grows, and it continues to grow even after chapter 35. Chapter 35 isn’t the end of the darkness; it’s a promise in the darkness that God is still in this. To all with weak knees, shaking hands, and racing hearts, it’s a word of assurance: “Be strong, take heart, here is your God.” What it doesn’t promise, yet, is that troubles are over or will not yet be. Indeed, John will suffer and die, and so will Jesus. The darkness has not fully descended yet. And yet, even in the darkness, faith holds on, the light still shines, the darkness cannot stop the light. You can make it through this trouble; you will make it through, and you are not alone. God is in this. God is in this with you.

We remember this every time we sing Emmanuel, and every time we light the rose-colored candle on the third Sunday of Advent. The other Sundays we light purple, the color of repentance and faith in the midst of suffering and cleansing and preparation. On the third Sunday we light rose colored, the purple of today infused with white hope of tomorrow.

It is not yet Christmas white, but it is a reminder that the darkness of the dark will soon be in retreat. The nights are getting longer and darker now, but after the longest, darkest night, the light returns. Even in the world’s deepest darkness, even in descent or despair, this is the hope of the gospel. And it is true. And all shall be well. Somehow, someway, the light always finds a way. In prison cells and hospitals, through rejection letters and broken hearts. In Bethlehem and at Calvary, the light finds a way. The light of the world is come, and the

darkness cannot overcome it.

Rejoice, rejoice, O Israel. Rejoice, O Church. Rejoice, Emmanuel, your God, is here.

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1. “The Protest of Hope,” in Staton, Cecil, ed, *Interpreting Isaiah for Preaching and Teaching*, 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)