

## Rejoicing in the “Already” but “Not Yet”

Last week’s passage from taken from the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem is viewed as describing the “peaceable kingdom” of the fulfilled reign of God. This morning’s text, also from the Isaiah scroll, but from a later time period known as 2<sup>nd</sup> Isaiah and probably written as the exiled people began to anticipate going back and reclaiming their place in the land promised in their covenant relationship. Again the prophet sees a reality that has not happened, and in fact, one which will not actually occur in their lives when the exiles return home. As this passage begins, the prophet is offering the exiles a word of hope: the Lord will come and save. In the meantime, those to whom the prophet speaks have been given a task. “Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees.” The prophet affirms the glory and majesty of the Lord will be seen, therefore they are told “so say to those who are of a fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.’” The prophet envisions that when God intervenes to save them from exile even the wilderness and the dry land will be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly. The way back to their homeland will be unlike the Exodus journey their ancestors made. It will be marked by waters in the wilderness and streams in the dessert; there will be no dangerous beasts. The vulnerable will be safe in the litany he describes. “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. At least on the surface, it seems as if that is the prophet’s vision for this return trip to Palestine. But on closer examination the highway that is described there seems to be more than a physical road. Those who had conquered the Israelites had been known for their road building talents and accomplishments which might explain the imagery. Indeed, the vision highway may not be a physical one at all for the name given it describes a different type of destination. “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.” This highway is the pathway of following God’s ways. This path is for the ransomed of the Lord, and they shall travel upon it with singing, everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness. If the vision seen by Isaiah is of the redemption we have been given through Jesus, then when we walk the path of discipleship, we can claim this everlasting joy. In many ways, that is what the visions we have been given of the reign of God tell us through the gospel narratives. Our redemption comes because we have been claimed and set upon that highway called the Holy Way. Unfortunately, the detail about not even fools being able to go astray has not yet proven to be true. The problem with these visions is that although the gospel narrative tells us that Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God—which also translates as the reign of God was near---that was over 2000 years ago...and when we look around we see more signs of the world’s brokenness than we see of the promised light’s shining. And we wonder when these prophetic visions will be fulfilled. The term which has been applied to this time we live in has been termed the “in

between time". The time when the kingdom has "already" come but is "not yet" fulfilled. Our passage from Matthew this morning has another appearance from John the Baptizer. John has proclaimed Jesus as the one whose way he was preparing with his call for repentance, yet it seems he now has some doubts. Herod has imprisoned him, so he sends some of his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" John evidently expected Jesus to "clean" house, so to speak. Remember his calling the Pharisees and Sadducees a brood of vipers? From his prison cell, John hears about what Jesus is doing in the country side. That "cleaning house" wasn't what Jesus was doing, so he begins to wonder. Jesus tells John's disciples to go back and report to John what he is doing: "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." John wanted a Messiah who came with fire to "clean house", while Jesus came with healing, mercy and forgiveness...even calling the unrighteous to repentance. It seems that the vision of the coming of the Messiah meant something different not only to some of the disciples who followed Jesus who expected him to overthrow the Romans, but to John who was to prepare the way for his coming. And in many ways, the question which John asked is one which each of us needs to consider about our expectations of Jesus as Messiah and the kingdom we routinely ask God to bring. This question of Jesus' identity is raised throughout all of the gospel narratives and the answer is that God's answer is never the one we human beings expect or want. The King God sent came to serve, not to rule. The One John came to prepare the Way for did not clean the house with everlasting fire but with everlasting forgiveness and mercy. As revealed in many places, God's ways are not our ways...so when we look for the signs of the kingdom, perhaps we aren't looking in the right ways or the right places. Sometimes, we just have to refocus our eyes in order to catch glimpses of God's reign among us. That is not to say that the world is not still broken. It is. But there are many who are disciples of Christ who are walking on that Holy Way, carrying the light with them into some very dark places. There are many who work to bring good news to the poor; who try to bring justice in an unjust world; who treat all whom they meet with equality and seek to convince others to do the same; there are many who seek to break down barriers of race, ethnicity, gender and class bias; there are many who seek to care for the least of these in our midst whether they are the very young or the very old. It is true that there are many dark places, but if we look, there are many places where the kingdom is breaking in with the light of Christ shining through. We are called to remember Jesus' response to John's question—what you see may not be what you expect but that does not mean that the kingdom is not present. It is. Now, what are we called to do about it? We are called to remember the reality of what Jesus brought to the world: healing and mercy; and a call for us to follow in that path, the path envisioned by the prophet Isaiah—the Holy Way of the Lord's redeemed. To strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees in the words of Isaiah. The Advent season represents anticipation of the coming return,

but it is also a time for us to recognize that the kingdom is also near now if we but look around with discerning eyes. With Christ's spirit dwelling among us, we can see hope for the world in the actions of his disciples everywhere as work for peace goes forward; we can claim the peace of Christ for ourselves and the joy found in his abiding presence which can bring comfort and strength through all the trials this broken world can offer. The Redeemed are still foolish and go astray, but the Jesus told John's disciples that the kingdom he brought was one of mercy and forgiveness, healing and restoration, reconciliation and seeking out of the lost. With that good news to share, we have hope for the future, peace of mind and heart and yes, true joy. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.