

Year B Advent 3 Hope in the Face of Resistance John 1 vv6 to 8 and 19 to 28 with Isaiah 61 vv1 to 4 and 8 to 11

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me. Two different readings. Two very different men many centuries apart. Both sent by God, our God, who is continuously acting to bring all of creation into a state of wholeness. These two men are sent to be messengers. John is a witness, sent to testify to the light, sent to be the voice of one crying in the wilderness telling everyone who will listen to get ready for the coming of God among them. Isaiah is sent to bring good news, to proclaim the healing that God is bringing to fulfillment.

The coming of God among the people that both messengers proclaim is bathed in the cosmic language of the creation of the world. “The Spirit of God is upon me” brings us back to the beginning when the Spirit of God hovered over the waters awaiting the Word, waiting to bring goodness out of nothingness, waiting for the Word of God that would say, “let there be light.” The Word of God that brought light to creation in the beginning was made flesh, John tells us, made flesh to bring light and to be light to a world living in darkness. Isaiah and John both give us creation stories today. Not the creation of a new world of stones and trees, of oceans and grasslands, but the creation of a new world of justice and righteousness and praise, a world in which lives are made new.

Isaiah is sent to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. This was the Jubilee year. It was part of a trio of sabbaths – the weekly sabbath every seven days, the sabbath that came about every seven years, and the Jubilee – the sabbath that only came after every seven times seven years. We think of sabbath simply as a time of rest,

perhaps spending some time in prayer and reflection but we have lost the original intention of this trio of sabbaths commanded by God. The weekly day of rest was to be a day of rest for all people – the master of the house *and* the servant. The seventh year of rest was a rest for the land – the fields were not to be tilled and planted. Whatever grew in the fields that year of its own accord was to be shared freely among all of the people and animals, not stored up by the owner of the field. The Jubilee year – the sabbath year that came after seven times seven years – was heralded by trumpets and great joy. It was the year when all property was returned to its original owner and all slaves returned to their families. This trio of sabbath observances were commanded in order to create and maintain a society of equals with no social or economic divides. These sabbaths were for the protection of all vulnerable people, of all animals, and the land that sustains us. When Isaiah mentions that this Jubilee year is to be proclaimed at the coming of the Lord, this lets us know that God will establish this completely equitable society and bountiful earth *and* it will be permanent. God's justice, righteousness and praise will be as natural and as flourishing as a garden that has been sown with seeds.

The healing wholeness of God's kingdom is attained through bringing the good news to the oppressed, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners – the good news that God's kingdom is coming in its fullness and the freedom that comes from walking in God's ways rather than being chained to the constant acquisition and competition of the world. These are the words Jesus reads in his hometown synagogue. He is the one to bring about the reversal and the restoration – the lifting up of the marginalized,

the lowering of the greedy that Mary joyfully sings about when she accepts her role in God's purpose.

We have a role that we have accepted in this as well. Again today we hear John tell us that he baptizes with water. God baptizes in the Holy Spirit. We are those people in the passage of Isaiah who greatly rejoice in the Lord, our whole being exults in our God; for he has clothed us with the garments of salvation, he has covered us with the robe of righteousness. Just as Jesus of Nazareth was anointed with the Spirit at his baptism, so too, are we. As Christ's body we join with him in his ministry of gathering and healing – seeking out the light of Christ and being the light of Christ in the world full of darkness.

But, we were once like those who mourn in Zion. They are particularly named by God through Isaiah. They receive special words of comfort and provision from their God. Why? The people in Zion – Jerusalem – were the former exiles who had chosen to return to their homeland when King Cyrus of Persia defeated Babylon and gave them permission to return. They returned to harsh conditions – their city and their temple was in ruins, like the war-torn pictures of Gaza we see on the news. The economic system had collapsed and the living conditions were deplorable. There was a group struggling to rebuild, trying to be positive but, a couple decades in, not much progress had been made and the Messiah had not come to them. They had been sure the Messiah would come to them, to mend the brokenness, when they returned home to Israel. They had been proclaiming his return. They had been spreading the good news of the perfection and joy that would be theirs but nothing seemed to be happening and hope was in short supply.

Like those people of Zion, we too face the temptation to be disheartened by the seeming lack of progress, the delay of God's return, and the sheer vastness of the need of the world around us. Like the small group in Zion proclaiming the good news and trying to stay positive we meet with resistance and sometimes even with hostility. The questioning John endured by those sent by the Pharisees – who are you? What right do you have to baptize? – was a small taste of the resistance and hostility to come. John was beheaded for daring to confront petty earthly tyrants with the word of the Lord. In order to get to, and stand with, the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners, we are inevitably going to run up against the perpetrators and sources of the oppression, marginalization, hopelessness, and despair. It is not surprising that resistance and hostility would come from the ones who benefit from the way things are but there are also deeply ingrained resistances – the world does not give us time and the world does not make room for us to be the body of Christ together as we should: busyness and priorities shape our lives and keep us from spending time in prayer, in bible study, in worship.

The resistance, perhaps surprisingly, often comes from within ourselves. Walking in God's ways is not easy, not always fun. Walking the path God nudges us toward is often a path that makes us uncomfortable and anxious. Change and stepping out of our comfort zones is difficult. Feelings of tiredness and despair lead to resistance as well: "Why bother?" we may hear ourselves saying. What difference are we making?

One woman writes of a day firmly fixed in her memory, a day when a beaming smile from a stranger changed the course of her life.

Several years ago, she begins, I was experiencing a particularly bad day, one that stood out as being worse than other bad days. I honestly can't remember why it was worse — probably a build up of emotion — but I remember feeling terribly lonely, invisible, worthless, unseen. I was distraught, feeling hopeless and very irrational. With the kids delivered safely to school, I was heading home...feeling deeply suicidal. It was a horrible drive home, tears rolling down my cheeks, feeling as though the world was speeding past me at warp speed (although I was plodding along at about 60 kph).

Then, around a corner came a farmer bouncing along in a beat up yellow utility vehicle. I recall his old farm dog hanging over the back, tongue hanging out, happy as anything with the wind blowing back its fur. This farmer waved at me, his smile broad and genuine; he looked as happy as his old dog. In the split second our paths crossed on that country road, he looked into my eyes and warmed my heart.

It seems silly to say it, but the loneliness and invisibility I had felt dissipated in that moment, she continues, because someone had looked at me and smiled — a stranger and his happy dog, going about their day, had passed by me in a flash but infected me with hope. The smile was contagious; it helped me more than words adequately can tell you, and I will always remember the feeling of it.

It was a feeling I want to be able to share – when I am driving alone in the country I smile and wave to each driver who passes me by, when I go to the shops, I look people in the eyes and smile at them, even on the days when smiling takes all my energy — especially on those days! I have observed many times myself how the smile can transfer to them too, I have seen the way their face relaxes. That is how

I share the smile given to me on a day when I needed it the most, by someone who has no idea what a difference they made in my life.

She concludes, “A simple smile is the most inexpensive random act of kindness you can give – it could even change a life.” ([How a Single Smile From a Stranger Saved My Life \(themighty.com\)](#))

If you ever find yourself wondering what difference we are making, remember this story. If a smile can change the course of someone’s life just imagine the difference we are making with our donations to the food bank, with the conversations we have with the men eating supper at St. Vincent Place, with the gifts three happy young boys and a mum are going to find under their tree on Christmas morning.

As Archbishop Anne writes in her Advent letter, “This Advent..know that you have enough light in you to be the Light for someone else. You have precious gifts to give that are not wrapped with any bow. You carry within you the good news that Jesus will come as he promised. You have within you the hope that can disperse the gloomy clouds in another’s life and send death’s dark shadow away. May this Advent be for [us] a precious holy time of preparation for the dawning of a new day with the arrival of the Christ-child. A day that will bring new hopes and new possibilities. Let us watch and wait together with unshakeable hope for the Prince of Peace.