

2022 12 11 – Joy in the Tilling

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10 (The Inclusive Bible)

On Monday of this past week, I received calls about two different funerals. The first one, for Greg Miller, took place on Thursday and the second one, for Betty Reaves, is happening tomorrow at Riverview Village Estates. Greg was 40, Betty was 76. Both deaths happened quickly, both were unexpected. The families are now left to grieve the loss of their loved one.

Funerals are obviously full of sadness. They provide a time and a space to grieve. But, as you know, funerals are also often opportunities for story-telling and even for laughter. They are a celebration of the deceased person's life and there is often joy, real joy, in the remembering.

Advent is also a time for joy-filled remembering. For some of us, it is a time when we remember past Christmases and the joy of being with family. It is also a time when we remember the Christmas story, the birth of Jesus in a lowly stable. And we celebrate the birthday of someone who was born over 2000 years ago. We remember and celebrate the stories of Jesus' birth, his life and the new life that came from his ministry. We remember and we sing the joy-filled carols of the Christmas season. And there is joy in the remembering.

Also this week I officiated at a wedding. The wedding took place yesterday afternoon here in this sanctuary. Leia Anderson and Gareth Strydom said their vows and were joined together in marriage. Weddings are truly joy-filled

occasions. They are a time when love is celebrated and families are united and everybody is ready for a party. At a wedding, the joy is felt in two ways: it is real in the moment and it also exists in the hope for a blessed future together.

There can be joy in remembering, joy in the present and even joy in what is possible for the future. This third type of joy is often called anticipatory joy. This is the kind of joy that Janet read about in today's scripture reading.

You see the Israelites had little reason to be joyful in their current circumstances. If you remember, last week the people of Judah were under attack. Well this week's reading takes place about 200 years later after another attack by a different enemy. And this most recent war did not go well. Many of the Israelites are now in exile in Babylon. They are in the midst of 60 years of exile and they are longing to return home.

In the midst of their despair and longing, the prophet is providing his people with a prophecy of hope and joy. He is telling them that better times are coming. He uses the metaphor of a desert where waters break forth and the land becomes thick with reeds and papyrus, where the crocus will bloom. The prophet, we'll call him Second Isaiah, even talks about a highway, a Sacred Path that will lead the faithful back to Zion, to Jerusalem, to the holy Temple of their God.

This Second Isaiah assures them that God is coming to save them, that they will be vindicated, that they will receive what is justly theirs. And when that happens,

they will enter Zion shouting for joy,
with everlasting joy on their faces;
joy and gladness will go with them,
and sorrow and lament will flee away.

Isaiah is telling the Israelites to rejoice even now at the thought of the time to come. He is telling them to “Take courage! Do not be afraid!” He is assuring them that a better life will soon be here. This is called anticipatory joy, joy that comes from anticipating, expecting, visioning a new life of peace and justice.

Can you think of times in your own lives when you have experienced anticipatory joy? When you have felt joy because of some future event that you knew would be wonderful? What about the joy of being pregnant, of anticipating the birth of a child? Or the joy we feel as we approach graduation from high school or the anticipation as summer holidays draw near? If you are a farmer or a gardener you will be familiar with the joy of watching a crop grow and mature in anticipation of harvest.

But we also know that pregnancy, education and farming are not just about waiting and anticipating. They are also about preparing and working towards our dreams. In pregnancy, the mother-to-be is making sure that she eats properly and gets enough rest. She is reading books about babies and gathering the materials she will need to care for an infant. The student is studying, writing papers and preparing for exams and the farmer is plowing, planting, watering, spraying—doing all the things that they can to ensure a good harvest. And the

joy is not just from anticipating the dream, it also comes in the tilling, in the studying, and in the preparing.

And that is exactly what Advent season is all about. It is a time of waiting for and anticipating the coming of Jesus, the coming of the Christ. But even more important, it is a time of preparing. It is a time when we shop for gifts, bake special cakes and cookies, decorate our homes, put up our trees, and make travel plans for Christmas week. It is a time of concerts, TV specials, Christmas movies and special church services. And, for many of us, the joy is in the preparing, the joy is the doing.

Advent is a time of preparing ourselves for the coming OF Christ into our lives. It is a time of prayer and meditation, of Advent studies and reflections. It is a time of opening ourselves to the light of Christ in our own hearts and minds. It is a time of tilling and watering the soil within our own souls and making them ready for the blossoming of new life. And even within ourselves, the joy is in the tilling.

Advent is also a time of giving. It is a time of giving to the Christmas Hampers, the Salvation Army, and other charities. It is a time of volunteering for the Kettle Campaign, to deliver food on Christmas Eve, to bake for the Christmas Tea, to serve at the Advent lunches. During Advent we give of our time, our talent and our wealth. And the joy is in the giving, the joy is in the service.

The Moment for Reflection in today's bulletin is a quote from Rabindranath Tagore. He was a poet, writer, playwright, composer, philosopher, social reformer and painter who lived in the late 1800's and early 1900's. He wrote:

I slept and dreamt that life was joy.

I awoke and saw that life was service.

I acted and behold, service was joy.

Joy is not just in the receiving. Joy is in the tilling, the preparing, the doing and the giving. Joy is in the remembering, the living and the anticipating. True joy is possible even as we wait for the desert to bloom. May it be so. Amen.