

Companions on the Way



Worship Resources

Advent



Daily Reflections: Week 3 (Rejoice)

Day One: Read Isaiah 35:1-10

What wonderful, uplifting, joyous words. My heart dances and smiles in anticipation of this wondrous promise of the restoring of the world, of our world, to fullness and joy. How does your heart react? What hope stirs in you? And what if any resistance or cynicism pushes back?

These promises were made to an exiled people, who although chosen had every reason to feel judged, punished and abandoned. These promises must have felt like restorative rain in a parched desert, and news of arriving rescue workers to the survivors of a terrible natural disaster.

And as followers of Jesus the Christ most also hear this as the promise of the one who would come and become the highway to God for all people. Last week we heard John the Baptist use the language of Isaiah when proclaiming "Prepare the way of the Lord".

I am also struck by the description of the way in verse 8. "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 traveller, not even fools, shall go astray." It suggests to me that it is the process of journeying on the way that does the restoration. The decision to travel on the Holy Way and the process of travelling sorts us out - the unclean, or uninterested, cannot find or enter. Yet those who do want to travel, even those of us who are fools, shall find we are changed, refined, saved, and grown by the process of travelling the Holy Way.

Many in this age, as in the centuries before us, have walked in pilgrimage. If you want your imagination expanded have a look at some of the material available on the Camino. One

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saying, from the mystic Rumi, is “As you start to walk out on the way, the way appears.” It is a decision to walk the Camino, or the Way of faith, but what unfolds on the path cannot be limited to what we choose or prepare ourselves for – the path will walk us as much as we walk the path.

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Day Two: Read Psalm 146:5-10

One of the many things I love about the psalms and I presume those who wrote them is the honesty and faithfulness. At times the psalmist shakes their fist at heaven before then bowing in reverence and surrender to the greatness of God. Today's psalm is not that angry but there is a chronicling of both the blessings down through the generations from creation to the time of Jacob and to the time in which the faithful are gathered (us now saying these psalms together) and a chronicling of the sufferings of humanity - oppression, hunger, being a stranger, being bowed down.

It is one of the tasks of mature faith and personhood to be able to hold both the blessing and the struggle and not pretend one or the other does not exist. In our times of blessing we need to be open to the struggles of others. And in our time of struggle and suffering we need to be able to hold onto the blessing of God.

Where are you at the moment? Can you recount the blessings in your life? And can you open your heart to the suffering and struggle in yourself, your family, your neighbours both near and far, well known and strangers? What we find to be opposites God manages to hold in the one loving embrace.

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Day Three: Read James 5:7-10

You can almost hear the tender yet urgently encouraging tone of voice of the author. How do you respond when you are called Beloved? Does your heart lift within you at the encouragement that the Lord is coming, the harvest will come to those now suffering and waiting. And/or does your heart sink a little at the inference that the waiting will be more of the same - patience, waiting on the rain over which we have no control, withholding our grumblings (no matter how much due cause we are given!). As with yesterday it seems that we must learn how to hold and live with blessings and struggles, promises and waiting in the very real and sometimes painful world. In this way maybe Advent is practice for how we must live all of this earthly life. Informed by hope and able to translate the implications of our hope in the midst of very ordinary reality.

In the quietness of your prayers allow your hope to rest in the palm of one hand and your fears and struggles in the palm of the other hand. And then in prayer bring your hands together gently knowing that it is the rich mess of your life that you give over to God.

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Day Four: Read Matthew 11:2-11

Which one amongst us has not asked of Jesus or God a variation on the question: “Are you the one ... or are we to wait for another?” And especially in those dark moments when we are imprisoned by pain, fear, confusion, grief. If we can imagine John the Baptist, who has lived his whole strange life in prophetic isolation and zeal is now a prisoner for his truth telling and facing death. It sounds as though he is asking the inevitable question – “Has my life been worth it? Was I actually doing God’s will and not just wasting my time?”

Jesus’ response is a little curious. He does not directly say Yes but points to the evidence of the healing ministry he is undertaking. He does so using the words of Isaiah’s prophecy which is particularly relevant given John’s ministry has been to prepare the way for him using the language of Isaiah so I suspect that John would have heard not just ‘evidence’ but also the reassurance of his own world view being echoed positively back to him. Yes, you got it right; yes, your ministry has been important; yes, your achievements will echo down the halls of faith long after your life and death.

What leads you to question, doubt, and feel confused and directionless? And what language, images, promises of God help you know that you are on the right path? In faith there is room for both our uncertainties and our certainties – indeed probably both are necessary. Questions make room for answers and reassurances. A measure of certainty allows us to go on.

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Day Five: Read all four readings again (and the Magnificat):

At long last, on the third Sunday of Advent, we have some readings that sound a note of joy. Not yet the sweet innocent joy of the baby in the manger but the deep joy of the exiled remnant of God anticipating returning to Zion as fast as their feeble knees will allow them; the courageous joy of the young Mary who glimpses that in her Yes to God is the raising up of the one who will make real the promises of God; and the relief of John the baptiser in hearing the evidence that Yes the one he baptised was indeed the holy one of God making real the promises of God in this broken world.

Each of our readings this week is amazing. Read together they are almost like a dialogue, a conversation between the hope and promise of Isaiah's prophecies and the real-life struggles and limitations of our existence. Who is not encouraged by images of gardens dripping with moisture and beauty in the barren lands; feeble hands and knees strengthened again; the most marginalised - the blind and the lame - able to participate fully. Even vengeance - if we desire it - will be taken care of for us.

If we only had this reading we could hear that we get to faithfully prayerfully sit back and wait for God's generous righteous reign to get started. But the other readings place us firmly in real life with all its struggles and uncertainties.

This means that the sort of rejoicing we are invited into is the sort of joy we can fully participate in. We do not need to pretend that all is easy or good or joy-joy-happy-happy to take our part in rejoicing. Indeed, this is the deep faith-filled courageous rejoicing of the broken, frail and failed ones who recognise in the promises of God the hope of the world.

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Advent Group Three: Rejoice

At long last, on the third Sunday of Advent, we will hear a note of joy. Not yet the sweet innocent joy of the baby in the manger but the deep joy of the exiled remnant of God anticipating returning to Zion as fast as their feeble knees will allow them; the courageous joy of the young Mary who glimpses that in her Yes to God is the raising up of the one who will make real the promises of God; and the relief of John the baptiser in hearing the evidence that Yes the one he baptised was indeed the holy one of God making real the promises of God in this broken world.

Discuss:

Several times it has been my privilege to read the Isaiah reading in a nursing home and the first few times I was uncomfortable about reading the promise that even the feeble knees would carry us on the way when I was surrounded by those whose knees didn't work anymore. However, I found that those with bad knees delighted in the reading! At some level those with bad knees understood the task of faith to hear and declare the promises of God while still living in the limited state that we so often do. How do you read the promises of God for wholeness and healing when you are in a place of pain or suffering?

James encourages the tribes of faith to have patience. How are your patience levels when you consider the issues on the evening news and the slowness sometimes to realise our plans and dreams in the tribe of faith?

When like John the baptiser have you wondered if your life's work has been misplaced or mistaken? What reassured you? And what helps you live with any remaining questions you may have?

What are you rejoicing about at this time in your life individually, as a faith group and as a community?

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More information:

- Website: www.companionsontheway.com
- Blog: www.companionsontheway.com/blog
- Email: contact@companionsontheway.com