

ISAIAH 35:1-10 & LUKE 1:39-56

AN ARTIST WAS PAINTING A WINTER SCENE. HE FILLED THE CANVAS WITH A SNOW COVERED GROUND AND PINE TREES. THE PAINTING WAS SET NEAR THE CLOSE OF THE DAY, WHEN DARKNESS HAD ALMOST ENGULFED THE LIGHT.

A GRIM LOOKING CABIN COULD BARELY BE SEEN THROUGH THE TREES, IN THE FADING LIGHT. THE ARTIST PAUSED IN HIS WORK TO VIEW THE SCENE. THEN HE PICKED UP A SMALLER BRUSH AND DIPPED IT IN YELLOW PAINT.

NEXT, HE COMPLETELY TRANSFORMED THE PAINTING WITH A FEW STROKES OF THE BRUSH. WHAT HE DID WAS SIMPLE, YET PROFOUND.

HE PUT A WARM GLOW OF CANDLE LIGHT IN ONE CABIN WINDOW, AND PLACED A FEW STREAKS OF LIGHT ON THE SNOW BELOW IT.

THAT SMALL SENSE OF LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS OVERCAME THE GLOOM THAT WAS THERE BEFORE, REPLACING IT WITH A GLOW OF HOPE AND JOY.

ISAIAH'S MESSAGE FROM GOD TO HIS PEOPLE IN EXILE SOUGHT TO PAINT A SIMILAR PICTURE IN THEIR MINDS.

IT WAS A WORD OF HOPE THAT HOWEVER BLEAK THEIR PRESENT AND FUTURE MIGHT SEEM-THERE WOULD ONE DAY BE CAUSE FOR REJOICING.

THE VISION WAS GIVEN OF THE RENEWAL OF THE DESERT, WHERE WATER WOULD FLOW, TREES GROW, AND FERTILE SOIL BE FOUND.

THE PROPHET SPEAKS ABOUT MIRACULOUS HEALINGS, AND ABOUT NATURE REJOICING IN THE WORK OF THE LORD.

HE ALSO TOLD THEM GOD AND WILL SEND A SAVIOR TO HEAL THEM, AND LEAD HIS PEOPLE HOME.

IN VERSES THREE AND FOUR THE JOY OF THIS NEW ERA ENCOURAGES THE PEOPLE TO BE STRONG, AND TO TRUST IN THE LORD TO FULFILL HIS PROMISES TO THEM.

THE PROMISE HERE IS NOT OF A "QUICK FIX", BUT A CALL TO TRUST IN GOD AND ENDEAVOR TO LIVE IN HIS LIGHT.

CHRISTMAS JOY, IS MUCH LIKE THIS. THE CALL TO REJOICE IN CHRIST IS NOT A DENIAL OF THE HARDSHIPS OR GRIEF WE ENCOUNTER IN LIFE.

INSTEAD, IT IS LIKE A LIGHT IN THE CABIN WINDOW ON A COLD-DARK, NIGHT.

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, IS THE SUNDAY WE FOCUS ON JOY.

MUCH LIKE PALM SUNDAY CALLS US TO JOY JUST BEFORE THE DARKNESS OF GOOD FRIDAY-SO ALSO AS WE COUNT DOWN THE TIME TO THE LONGEST NIGHT OF THE YEAR-WE ARE CALLED TO REJOICE.

FOR JUST LIKE WE HAVE TO PASS THROUGH GOOD FRIDAY TO GET TO EASTER-SO ALSO WE MUST ENDURE THE LONGEST NIGHT, ON DECEMBER 21, BEFORE WE GET TO CHRISTMAS.

BUT THE GOOD NEWS IS WITH THE SUN RISE ON THE DAY THAT FOLLOWS, THE CYCLE OF DARKNESS IS BROKEN AND DAYLIGHT BEGINS TO TAKE OVER, ONCE MORE.

HERE IS A METAPHOR FOR OUR ADVENT JOURNEY. WE ALREADY KNOW THE END OF STORY-JESUS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD WAS BORN.

BUT, OF COURSE HIS INCARNATION, MEANS THAT IT DID NOT HAPPEN INSTANTLY, BUT OVER THE NATURAL COURSE OF TIME.

THIS BRINGS US TO HIS MOTHER MARY, AND HER OWN METAPHORICAL JOURNEY THROUGH THE DARKNESS TO THE LIGHT.

IF ANYONE NEEDED TO FIND STRENGTH FOR HER JOURNEY, IT WAS MARY.

YES SHE WAS BETROTHED TO JOSEPH, BUT NOT YET IN HIS HOUSEHOLD, NOT YET SUPPOSED TO BE CARRYING A CHILD.

GABRIEL'S NEWS OF GOD'S CALL FOR HER TO BE THE MOTHER OF JESUS BY THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, WAS AS MUCH A CAUSE FOR FEAR AS REJOICING.

AFTER ALL, HER PREGNANCY COMPLICATED THINGS FOR HER, HER FAMILY, JOSEPH, AND PERHAPS HER NEIGHBORS.

SO FIRST, SHE SOUGHT CLARIFICATION FROM GOD'S MESSENGER ABOUT WHAT WAS BEING ASKED OF HER.

THEN, MARY TRUSTED IN GOD'S WORD AND PLACED HERSELF UNDER HIS PROTECTION.

YET SHE WAS NOT SIMPLY A PASSIVE VESSEL OF DIVINE WILL AS WE OFTEN PICTURE HER TO BE.

INSTEAD, MARY TOOK SOME INITIATIVE IN HER ROLE AS THE MOTHER OF JESUS.

SHE REVEALED THE FIRMNESS OF HER KNEES, AND THE STRENGTH OF HER CHARACTER AFTER THE ANGEL LEFT HER.

HAVING LEARNED THAT HER KINSWOMAN ELIZABETH, WAS ALSO MIRACULOUSLY PREGNANT, MARY LEFT HOME AND TRAVELED TO SEE HER.

SHE WENT TO ELIZABETH SEEKING TO GIVE AND RECEIVE SUPPORT FROM SOMEONE WHO WOULD BE ABLE TO RELATE TO HER EXPERIENCE.

MARY WENT TO THE ONE PERSON SHE WAS SURE WOULD BELIEVE HER STORY AND GIVE HER GUIDANCE.

AFTER ALL IF A MIRACLE HAPPENED IN YOUR LIFE THAT FEW IF ANY WOULD LIKELY BELIEVE, WOULDN'T YOU WANT TO TALK TO SOMEONE WHO YOU HEARD HAD A SIMILAR EXPERIENCE?

SO MARY SOUGHT OUT THE COMPANY OF ANOTHER WHO COULD SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE HER, AND ONE TO WHOM SHE ALSO COULD BE OF HELP.

THE MEETING OF THESE TWO WOMEN REPRESENTS THE MEETING OF CHRISTIANS TIME AND TIME AGAIN.

GOD OFTEN USES OTHER PEOPLE TO HELP CLARIFY AND AFFIRM OUR INDIVIDUAL CALLS TO SERVICE.

WE LIKE MARY AND ELIZABETH ALSO, HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY IN GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION. WE ALL HAVE TASKS THAT WE CAN DO BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE.

LIKEWISE CHRIST INTENDS HIS CHURCH TO BE A COMMUNITY OF HIS DISCIPLES.

ONE OF OUR TASKS IS TO HELP AND SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER AS WE SEEK TO LISTEN FOR AND FOLLOW GOD'S CALL FOR OUR LIVES.

REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED WHEN MARY WENT TO HER KINSWOMAN?

HER CALL WAS CONFIRMED, AS THE BABY LEAPT IN ELIZABETH'S WOMB, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT CAME UPON HER.

THE OLDER WOMAN WAS SHOWN BY GOD THAT MARY'S CHILD WAS THE MESSIAH.

SHE REJOICES, AND PRAISES HER YOUNGER COUSIN FOR HER BELIEF IN GOD'S WORD AND HER ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S CALL TO SERVICE.

TRULY, LIKE ELIZABETH, SOMETIMES OUR TASK AS CHRISTIANS IS TO ENCOURAGE OTHERS IN THEIR CALLINGS.

OTHER TIMES, LIKE MARY WE HAVE A CHOICE TO MAKE-TO LISTEN FOR GOD'S WILL FOR US, AND TO ACCEPT OR REJECT OUR CALLING.

ACCEPTANCE OF GOD'S CALL CAN INDEED BE A BLESSING FOR US AND FOR OTHERS.

BUT WE SHOULD ALSO REMEMBER THAT BEING BLESSED AND CALLED TO DO GOD'S WORK DOES NOT MEAN EVERYTHING WILL RUN SMOOTHLY.

WE, LIKE MARY, CAN EXPECT TO ENCOUNTER SOME RISK TO GO ALONG WITH OUR PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.

SO LET US LOOK AGAIN AT MARY'S FAITH-FILLED RESPONSE TO ELIZABETH'S GREETING.

HER WORDS COULD BE CONSIDERED THE FIRST ADVENT HYMN.

THE JOYFUL SONG REMINDS US THAT THE ONE WE WAIT FOR IS NOT SO MUCH BABY JESUS, BUT OUR CRUCIFIED AND RISEN SAVIOR.

MARY MODELS FOR US HOW TO TRUST IN GOD FOR CHRIST'S RETURN, AS WE DO OUR PART IN PURSUING THE WORK WE ARE CALLED TO DO.

SHE SINGS HER THANKFULNESS FOR GOD'S FAVOR TOWARDS HER, AS SHE ACKNOWLEDGES THE RESPONSIBILITY TO WHICH SHE HAS BEEN CALLED.

MARY SHOULDERS THE CHALLENGE OF HER TASK IN CONFIDENCE THAT THE LORD IS WITH HER.

SHE ALSO DEMONSTRATES FAITH IN GOD'S POWER AND WILL TO BRING JUSTICE INTO THE WORLD.

MARY ENVISIONS THE TIME WHEN GOD WILL TRANSFORM HUMAN SOCIAL CONDITIONS, AS WELL AS OUR HEARTS.

HER WORDS PRAISE GOD FOR THE GREAT THING HE IS DOING, THROUGH HER, EVEN BEFORE IT IS ACCOMPLISHED.

BUT HER JOY IS ONE THAT SEES BEYOND HERSELF- TO HOW GOD'S POWER AND PRESENCE WILL IMPACT THE LIVES OF OTHERS.

THERE ARE IMPORTANT THINGS WE CAN LEARN FROM BOTH OF THESE WOMEN.

THE MEETING OF MARY AND ELIZABETH ILLUSTRATES FOR US THE NEED WE HAVE AS GOD'S SERVANTS TO BE WITH ONE ANOTHER.

THE STORY DEMONSTRATES HOW HELPFUL IT CAN BE TO SHARE WITH ONE ANOTHER, TO WORSHIP AND PRAISE GOD TOGETHER, TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER, AND TO WORK TOGETHER.

SO LIKE MARY, WE USUALLY NEED TO ACTIVELY SEEK OUT THE COMPANY OF OTHER CHRISTIANS.

AND LIKE ELIZABETH, WE NEED TO REJOICE IN GOD'S BLESSING OF ANOTHER WITH TASKS GREATER THAN OUR OWN.

TRULY THE GREATEST GIFT, AFTER OUR SALVATION AND THE HOLY SPIRIT, JESUS GAVE TO HIS DISCIPLES AND THUS TO ALL CHRISTIANS- IS THE CHURCH AND ITS SACRAMENTS.

FOR WHEN WE ARE IN A CHURCH, WHICH IS A COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS SINCERELY FOLLOWING THE LORD WE ARE BLESSED.

WE HAVE THE BLESSING OF MUTUAL SUPPORT AND CONFIRMATION OF FAITH. AND THIS ENABLES US TO SERVE CHRIST BETTER.

IN THIS SENSE CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND THE FINANCIAL AND OTHER SUPPORT IT ENTAILS, IS NOT SO MUCH A DUTY WE ARE GIVEN AS CHRISTIANS, BUT A GIFT.

THIS PASSAGE FROM LUKE'S GOSPEL THEREFORE, HAS MEANING BEYOND THE ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS SEASONS. IT TEACHES CHRISTIANS HOW TO BE BETTER DISCIPLES.

AND THERE IS ONE FINAL LESSON FOUND LUKE 1:39-55, WHICH MAY BE HELPFUL FOR US TO LOOK AT TODAY.

THIS LESSON IS ABOUT GOD'S ACTIONS AND HOW WHAT GOD DID FOR AND THROUGH ELIZABETH AND MARY HAS MEANING FOR US.

FOR ELIZABETH, GOD PROVIDED THE HOPE-FILLED COMPLETION OF HER PRAYERS, THROUGH THE GIFT OF A CHILD WHEN ALL EARTHLY HOPE OF BEING A MOTHER HAD VANISHED.

FOR MARY, GOD PROVIDED THE FAVOR OF BEING THE MOTHER OF JESUS. HE ALSO PROVIDED CONFIRMATION OF HER CALLING THROUGH ELIZABETH AND THE CHILD IN HER WOMB.

FOR YOU AND I, GOD GIVES THE GIFT OF THE CHRIST CHILD- HIS LIFE, DEATH, RESURRECTION, AND PROMISED RETURN.

WE ARE GIVEN THIS GREATEST OF ALL GIFTS SO THAT- WE MIGHT, LIKE MARY, TRUST IN THE LORD MORE FULLY, AND DO GOD'S WILL IN THE WORLD.

MAY WE LIKE MARY, ELIZABETH, AND SO MANY OTHERS, HEAR GOD'S WORD, HOLD FAST TO IT, SO THAT WORKING TOGETHER WE MAY BRING FORTH THE FRUIT, GOD-THE HOLY SPIRIT, PLANTS WITHIN US.

LET US PRAY:

GOD OF GRACE, YOUR ETERNAL WORD TOOK FLESH AMONG US WHEN MARY PLACED HER LIFE AT THE SERVICE OF YOUR WILL.

PREPARE OUR HEARTS FOR CHRIST'S COMING AGAIN; KEEP US STEADFAST IN HOPE AND FAITHFUL IN SERVICE BOTH AS INDIVIDUALS, AND WITH THE COMPANY OF OTHER BELIEVERS.

AS WE PREPARE TO CELEBRATE YOUR SON'S BIRTH, MAKE OUR HEARTS LEAP FOR JOY BECAUSE OF YOUR PRESENCE AMONG US.

MAY YOUR SPIRIT INSPIRE US TO PRAISE YOUR WONDERFUL WORKS, AND FIND A WAY TO BE A BLESSING TO SOMEONE IN THE NAME OF JESUS. AMEN

ISAIAH 35:1-10 & LUKE 1:39-56-SERMON SUMMARY

THE VISION WAS GIVEN BY ISAIAH, OF THE RENEWAL OF THE DESERT, WHERE WATER WOULD FLOW, TREES GROW, AND FERTILE SOIL BE FOUND.

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