

East Hartford
Advent 3 2013

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Is 35:1-10, Lk 1:46-55, Mt 11:2-11

“What Then Did/Do You?”

Here we are at the 3rd Sunday of advent, the only one where we still use the Latin name - Gaudete - the Sunday of Joy.

The biblical texts are full of promise, promises that evoke our joy.

In Mary's song, which we call the Magnificat, we hear promise when Luke sets forth the grand reversal of the gospel message; *“God has looked at the ordinary people with great love, the proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down, the rich are sent away empty, but the hungry have good things and the lowly are lifted up. The first are last and the last are first.”*

Surely the lesson from the prophet Isaiah invites our joy, with its beauty and its promise. I've yet to travel to any desert when it blooms, but photographs and friends testify to the beauty of the desert in full bloom. It does indeed blossom abundantly, and every blossom rejoices with joy and thanksgiving.

The eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. There will be waters in the wilderness and streams in the desert. . . .The ransomed of God shall return with singing, . . . sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Then we come to the gospel lesson. Now Matthew uses the word Messiah five times in the first 29 verses of his gospel - then the word Messiah disappears from view until this 11th chapter of Matthew's Gospel, “when John the Baptizer was in prison and heard what the Messiah was doing, John sent some of his students to ask, ‘Are you the one, or do we wait for another?’”

I believe that John, locked in the depths of a first century Roman

prison, needed to know if indeed his younger cousin, was the right guy.

How did Jesus answer him? “Go, and say this to John.” *The eyes of the blind are opened, the ears of the deaf are unstopped; the lame leap like a deer, and the tongues of the speechless sing for joy.* Jesus message for John echoed the promise of the prophet Isaiah. John would have been assured, I believe, that his call, his life and mission were indeed confirmed by God.

Then, it says, Jesus turned to the ever present crowd that conveniently appears every time Matthew needs an audience to listen to Jesus’ teachings. He asked the crowd a question, a good question, a question worth repeating, inviting the crowd to search their experience and their hearts ever more deeply. As Matthew tells it, Jesus asked his question three times.

“What then did you go out into the wilderness to look at? What then did you go out to see?” Then once more for good measure, *“What then did you go out to see?”* After each asking he offers a possible answer.

1. *“A reed shaken by the wind?”*
2. *“Someone dressed in soft robes - Look! Those dressed in soft robes are in royal palaces.”*
3. *“A prophet? Yes and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who shall prepare your way before you.’”*

What did you expect to see? What did you hope to see? What then did you go out into the wilderness to look at? he asked.

A reed shaken by the wind? Remember friends, it took a week, maybe ten days to walk from Jerusalem or Galilee down to the side of the River Jordan. Why bother to make that difficult and dangerous trip to see a reed shaken by the wind?

Were you looking to see someone dressed in soft robes? The

wilderness is the wrong place to see someone in soft robes. If you want to see someone dressed in soft robes, go. Go - look in a palace, that's where you'll find people all dressed up to the nines.

Or, he proposed, were you really looking for a prophet, a living prophet, someone holding and proclaiming the Word of God? As an ordinary person, as a nobody living in a country under Roman occupation, were you desperately hoping to be reminded of the promise proclaimed by earlier prophets of God? XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Put yourself into the shoes of those pilgrims who walked from the city on the mountain, out into the wilderness and down mountain paths into the valley of the river Jordan, to hear a man bellowing, "Repent and be baptized!"

If you look at the sermon title as it's printed in the bulletin, you'll find my invitation to enter into the present tense, to enter into now. "What then do you go out to see when you get into your car, what do you expect when you walk through the doors into this community, what do you hope for as you gather as this particular people of God, what do you need when you walk into this church?" XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Do you expect to find brothers and sisters in Christ whom you have so come to love and trust that you are steadfast and reliable friends?

Do you hope to find a kind of quiet beauty in this sanctuary that speaks to your soul.

Do you need to see the seasonal decorations that help tell the story of the Christ and add so much beauty?

Do you long to hear music that is new and music that is familiar - and which, whether new or familiar is performed so well that it too, conveys the very message which we are all about?

Do you expect to sit in a pew that holds fond memories of family

long since gone?

Do you expect to sit in a different pew in order to learn this congregation from a new perspective?

What then do you expect to see and hear from this pulpit; a prophet who brings the Word of God as call to repentance and conversion, as challenge to new ways of faithful living?

Do you want a pastor who brings the Word of God as promise of comfort, hope, strength, or one who proclaims the Word of God as a way to navigate the waters of life, so as to simply avoid the turbulence, and bypass the storms?

Do you expect to see a preacher who will bring the Word of God so as to leave the powers that be in place, undisturbed to oppress and abuse the people? Do you want to listen to a preacher who will leave you as you are?

What then do you go to find as you enter the doors of this building; a place and time for silent individual prayer and a time and place to pray together?

Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John asking: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone[d] dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet?[e] Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

I now ask you, "What do you go out on a Sunday morning to look at? What then do you go out to see? What then do you go out to hear?"