

VISIONS OF JOY AND REJOICING

Isaiah 65:17-25 & Isaiah 12:2—6

You shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation! Drawing water in Palestine in the centuries before Christ would have been a fairly simple affair – a deep hole to a source of underground water and some sort of bucket to drop down in the water, raise up and draw water from. It would take a little effort to lift up the bucket and then brim-full of water it would splash and slosh over the top drenching the ground and your feet. What a joyous image to draw water from the springs of salvation, splashing and sloshing the cold water of life.

Isaiah 12:2-6, the *First Song of Isaiah, Canticle 9*, as we know it in the BCP, was one of the Hallel Psalms, the Psalms of great joy used in the procession in the Feast of Sukkot. According to the Talmud the priests would draw water every day during the 7-day feast from the pool of Siloam and process with it to the temple to the sound of trumpet blasts, pouring it out as an offering on the altar. This 7-day celebration was accompanied by such jubilation that the Talmud says “*Whoever has not seen the rejoicing at the Place of the Water-Drawing has never seen rejoicing.*” (Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 51a-b, from *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, pg. 298*)

We usually turn to the Gospel and Epistle lessons for our source of good news in the Sunday lessons. Today we need go no further than the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 65 and the response in the form of the First Song of Isaiah from Isaiah 12, to discover good news. In fact both today's Gospel and Epistle are much more somber. But both these selections from Isaiah shine with joy!

But neither passage was written in good or happy times. Isaiah 12 represents the original or *First Isaiah* from the 8th Century BCE. The Assyrians threatened to destroy Jerusalem and to take over the Kingdom of Judah. Isaiah prophesied that the Assyrian threat would be thwarted. Isaiah 12:2-6 is a song of rejoicing to be sung on the day when Judah was to be delivered from Assyria's threat. To sing a song of rejoicing in the midst of that grave threat to the nation and people was surprising indeed.

First Isaiah comprises Isaiah 1-39, *Second Isaiah* from the period of Babylonian captivity, is found in Isaiah 40-55 and *Third Isaiah* (chapters 56-66) from the post-exilic time frame after a new generation of exiles returned to their homeland, from which their people had been exiled for 70 years. Today's passage from Isaiah 65:17-25 represents that post-exilic time period of the 6th century BCE

when the returned exiles found conditions in Jerusalem far from idyllic. At that point they were more a clan than a nation. They were dirt poor. Their leaders were corrupt, and they were persecuted by their neighbors. The Temple remained a ruin. Jerusalem's walls had not yet begun to be rebuilt. The future of God's people could not have looked more bleak. In the midst of all those depressing realities the Prophet we know as *Third Isaiah* wrote that God was about to create new heavens and a new earth. He goes on to describe a utopian vision of a life that God would bring which would be so good that all their past miseries would be forgotten.

Our oracle speaks of Jerusalem transformed from a city of wickedness, injustice, false worship and ruin, into a glorious new city that will make Israel glad and will bring within its walls nations of the world to witness God's new creation. And indeed such a creation is marvelous to behold. Imagine a world where there is no more weeping, no infant mortality; people will live incredibly long, healthy lives. Economic injustice will be overturned and people will be able to reap the benefits of their own labor. There will be peace and prosperity. Parents will not bear children for calamity. God will answer their prayers even before they speak them. In every way they

will be blessed. But not only God's people, even nature itself will be transformed. The carnivore and their former prey will lie down together in safety without fear. I know it sounds heavenly, but this is not a picture of heaven but rather of this world transformed.

Speaking this stupendous vision of God's future might be as if a modern day Isaiah were to offer similar words of hope to the people of Haiti. Standing in the midst of the ruined city of Port au Prince, speaking to the teeming multitudes in tents and make-shift structures, the hillsides stripped of their former forests an ecological disaster, a city of devastating poverty, most structures destroyed by earthquake, facing a terrifying epidemic of Cholera. Could there be a greater contrast between the present reality and these words of immense promise? Yet this is the hope and promise God declares to his people in Port au Prince and to us.

Just because there is a huge disparity between the present reality and the future hope doesn't mean that it is all pie in the sky. Think of a modern day prophet – Martin Luther King Jr. standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial proclaiming that *I have a dream*. The very thing that made Martin Luther King Jr's dream so powerful was the disparity the way things were and the vision of the way they could

be. It is the same thing that makes this vision of God for the future so powerful. Certainly it is only a future that ultimately only God could bring about. But through the vision God also lays out a blueprint for the kind of world that it is God's desire to bring about. A world of health, harmony and wellness. A world without pain and suffering, where the misery and suffering that typifies so much of human life is transformed into well being.

While this is God's glorious future did not Jesus teach us to pray, "*thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?*" We cannot bring about God's Kingdom but we can each of us in our own way work towards it! We can live in such a way as if God's future Kingdom were breaking forth even now. And it is! As Paul taught us in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "*if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*" Jesus himself inaugurates the beginning of God's glorious future Kingdom. Jesus is the beginning of the vision of God's future proclaimed in Isaiah 65.

So how can we for our part work towards God's glorious future of hope and harmony and well being? In our small way we can each help one person, offer food to one, visit one, clothe one, support one,

listen to one who is hurting. Will that not make a difference in God's Kingdom? I think also of the visionary 8 United Nations Millennium Development Goals to eliminate extreme poverty. Are not these 8 goals – to halve extreme poverty by 2015, to achieve universal primary education, to eliminate gender inequality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other diseases, to ensure environmental sustainability, and to develop a global partnership for development – are not these goals a concrete way to work towards the vision of God's future held up to us by the prophet, 3rd Isaiah?

Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. The First Song of Isaiah is a joyful song of trust and hope in the God who has saved us and in the God who is even now, for all who are in Christ, bringing forth a new creation. Please turn with me to the *First Song of Isaiah* and proclaim it with joy as we take in the incredible scope of God's vision for our world. (At the 10:15 a.m. service we sang Hymn #679, a metrical version of the First Song of Isaiah)

Surely it is God who saves me; I will trust in him and not be afraid. For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior. Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation. And on that day you shall say, give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name; make his deeds known among the peoples; see that they remember

that his Name is exalted. Sing the praises of the Lord, for he has done great things, and this is known in all the world. Cry aloud, inhabitants of Zion, ring out your joy, for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.