

WGUMC Advent 3 December 14, 2014 "Armed with Joy"  
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says that God so loved the world and loves it for eternity. [John 3:16] But did Jesus mean *this* world, really? Exactly what is there to love about this world? If you look around, things don't look very good, especially in Jesus' old neighborhood. It's mayhem as usual in the Middle East. And there's more bad news from the travel industry. Fears of another Palestinian uprising are hurting the Christmas tourist season. I guess the upside is that this year there's a good chance there will be room at the inn in Bethlehem.

But as bad as things look in that part of the world, they don't look so good in this part of the world, either. Check out Ferguson, Missouri, and New York City. Clergy in New York gathered last week to protest the choking death of Eric Garner. They said, "God can't breathe" as long as we tolerate this level of police brutality. Then insult was added to injury with the

release of new reports about old atrocities committed at Guantanamo Bay by the CIA. And so it goes week after week. And we are left to wonder, how could God so love this world?

I bet Isaiah wondered the same thing as he looked at his broken world 2,500 years ago. The exiles were returning from Babylon, but their homes were in ruins. Then the word of the Lord came to Isaiah and he said, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; [God] has sent me to bring good news..." And the good news was for the oppressed, for the brokenhearted, for the captives, and for the prisoners. [Isaiah 61:1] But that was 2,500 years ago. Who is it for now? And where is it now?

The cynics of today point to the sorry state of the world today as proof that our faith is pointless. After all, what good is a god who can't—or worse yet, won't—cure cancer, save the environment, clean up the government, defeat poverty or put an end to war?

For Christians, the point is Jesus. Jesus is the good news that Isaiah was bringing. But Jesus came and went and still we wait. It's been over 2,000 years since his birth. The world is still a mess, and the skeptics want to know how long this delusion will keep us from despair.

I confess that I used to be one of those skeptics. When I was a junior in high school, I was in despair. It didn't help that I was in competitive speech and was graded on how well I kept up on all the bad things going on in the world. So, instead of Homecoming, I was thinking about the Iranian hostage crisis.

On top of that, bad things were going on in my world. The Christmas of my junior year, my sister came home from college and saw me have a seizure. I was hauled off to the doctor and diagnosed with epilepsy. So my low self-esteem got even lower, and I felt very much alone. Even though I went to talk to my pastor about my faith, I didn't really feel that I had a friend in Jesus.

That same year I wrote an essay for English. It was in the form of a letter to the Apostle Paul. And in my letter I wrote, "Now I am just curious to know what some people, those eternally happy and ever-smiling evangelical types, have on their minds day and night that makes them soar so high above failure and despair. Do they stop to think? I rather doubt it. If they had even a vague contact with reality, they would surely be as miserable as I am. The best term to describe people like that must be 'ignorant' or just 'phony.' Yet I'm sure they simply call themselves 'Christian.'"

It would be years before I learned that smiling Christians aren't denying reality; they are defying it. They aren't soaring above failure; they are just refusing to be defined by it. And it isn't that they never know despair. It's that they have been given a secret weapon to fight it. It's a weapon that no terrorists can get their hands on, no army or CIA agent can deploy, and no police department can buy. Forget the WMD's,

the IED's, the enhanced interrogation techniques. There is no better weapon against the terrors of our times and no better defense against all the demons of despair than the joy that arms a comrade in Christ.

At sixteen years of age, I just hadn't lived long enough to have suffered enough and survived enough to appreciate what joy really is. But I am beginning to. What I have learned since those horrible years in high school is that joy is not the same as happiness. It's not the sense of satisfaction that all is right with the world. Joy is not what we feel when we finally succeed in prettying up the picture, when we manage to close our eyes to the evil and ignore the needs of desperate people. No. To have joy is to be able to look long and hard at the harsh realities of human existence, to face all of its ugliness and cruelty, and at the same time not be imprisoned by it.

The good news is that Jesus comes to release us from that prison, to proclaim liberty to all of us who are held captive

by this bruised, broken and often brutal world. Jesus sets us free so that we can begin to grasp an alternative reality.

To believe in Jesus is to believe that God *can* come into human life, God's justice *can* right the wrong, God's love *can* redeem the lost, and God's peace *can* end the war. And that is good news.

So with Isaiah we will rejoice in the Lord and our whole being shall exult in our God, for God has clothed us with garments of salvation, and not only us, but all of creation.

And with Mary, the mother of Jesus, our souls will magnify the Lord and rejoice in God our Savior, for the Mighty One has done great things for us. God has scattered the proud and brought down the powerful. God has lifted up the lowly and filled up the hungry and sent the rich away empty. [Luke 1:47, 49, 51-53]

From these two, Isaiah and Mary, the prophet and the pregnant one, we learn that joy comes when Jesus comes and

we realize that even though our battle is not over, the war has already been won. The armistice has been signed. It just takes a while for the news to get to us on the front lines. So we can smirk at any persecution, we can laugh at any frustration, and we can gladly work for peace and for justice in the most hopeless situations, because God so loved this world and joy has already entered our being with the birth of Jesus.

Intifada or no intifada, the Palestinian Christians who are living in Bethlehem today will celebrate Christmas with or without the tourists. A family who has owned a farm there for 98 years woke up one morning last May to bulldozers knocking down their fruit trees. The Israeli government failed to take their land legally and were trying to run them off their land illegally.

The Nassar family are all Christians. For twenty years, their farm has also been a center for peacemaking and they regularly run workshops on nonviolence. Their motto: "No one

can force us to hate. We refuse to be enemies." When asked what they would do about the bulldozers, they said with a smile, "Plant more trees."

More than most of the tourists who make it to Manger Square in Bethlehem this Christmas Eve, the Nassar family grasps the reality that Jesus is the one who brings joy to the world. So this Christmas, let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room. And heaven and nature sing.