

Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)
John 1:1-14

From the first Sunday of Advent, which was November 27, until today, we have gone from the mountain top and back again. Our reading from Isaiah on the first Sunday of Advent referred to the mountain where all of the nations are to gather. They will gather because God's mountain will be an effective United Nations. The nations will gather there for they know that God will reign and judge with justice and righteousness. God will create a world where all will experience well-being and wholeness. Isaiah had proclaimed these words as words of hope for Judah, a people who were desperate for hope as they were about to be conquered and their land destroyed by the Babylonians. It was a crisis of faith for where was God. Had God abandoned them? Was God unable to protect Judah? In the season of Advent we heard time and time again words of hope for the season of Advent is a season of hope, hope that God would

The situation has changed now for Judah, changed for the better. A messenger will proclaim that God had defeated their old bully Babylon and Jerusalem is to be saved. There will be peace. Peace here was not going to be just the absence of war, but justice, right relationships, well-being, made possible by the presence of God. And so, Judah will "break forth together into singing, ... for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem." We have gone from an anticipated joy—that God will do something—to an actualized joy, God has done something on behalf of Judah.

Isaiah's prophecy in our reading today is good news. God will send a messiah. Messiah means "one who is sent," meaning sent by God. God's messiah was to save the people, to redeem them. Judah saw their redemption as being freed from their Roman overlords and once again being a great and mighty nation. They were looking

forward for another David, the greatest king Judah ever had. The Messiah was going to make Judah great again.

Well, good for them! But what about us? Yes, we recognize that the birth of the Christ Child, this Babe of Bethlehem, is the fulfillment of the prophecy that God would send a messiah. When we speak of prophecy, we are not talking about what has become a popular form of prophecy in our culture. Prophecy in our current society seems to be wildly apocalyptic and scary. For example, there have been a series of books and movies referred to as the "Left Behind" series. Millions of people suddenly vanish from the earth and the world is plunged into chaos and destruction. The anti-Christ comes to power as a demonic world leader, creating havoc, destruction, and death, concluding with Armageddon, the most horrendous battle the world has ever seen. The whole premise of the Left Behind series is an interpretation of scripture that is simply not biblical. In my opinion, the Left Behind is nothing more than entertainment, it is not even good entertainment. Prophecy is not apocalyptic and scary. Yes, there is apocalyptic readings in scripture, but they are not prophecy. Prophecy simply refers to a message that God had given to someone, such as Isaiah, to share with the world.

In this season of Christmas, we proclaim that the Christ Child, the Babe of Bethlehem, is the Messiah. We celebrate the birth of the messiah. God came to us as one of us so that we can relate to God. The birth of Jesus is the dawn of the time of salvation. It is the good news of God's decisive action and the source of our true joy. In these words of the prophet, when he calls on "you ruins of Jerusalem" to "break forth together into singing" (v. 9), the prophet's declares to us that we can break forth into singing. In Luke's gospel, Luke cannot make it through the first two chapters without

breaking into song four times. We find three canticles—which are songs found in scripture that are not psalms: the song of Mary, the song of Zechariah, and the song of Simeon. And we dare not forget--cannot forget--how the angels broke into song. How different our celebration of Christmas would be if we did not have the story of the angels and shepherds.

And yet, perhaps we may say silently—or maybe not so silently— “Bah! Humbug!” when we are encouraged to sing out in joy. Joy to the world? Bah Humbug! A cartoon depicts a husband and wife sitting in a living room that is gaily decorated for the Christmas season. The wife, however, has a deep frown on her face, and looks completely exhausted. In the caption the husband is saying, “Of course you’re depressed--‘tis the season to be jolly.” Ours is an anticipated joy, not an actualized joy. There’s no need for me to list why we may want to respond with “Bah Humbug!” We want to sing for joy, do we not? If we did not experience the joy of Christmas how can we experience it. If we have experienced the joy of this season, we want to extend it, do we not?

There are times, though, when faith requires action before we have fully thought through or lived into the consequences of our actions. Sometimes what we need to do is not change our thinking, but change our acting. We go through life believing that if we could change our thinking, we can change our acting. But that may be the reverse of what we should do. If we need to act as though we are joyful, we can begin to think we are joyful. The celebration of Christmas over and against what we may feel and experience some of the time may be one such action. In his 1915 story *The Happy Hypocrite*, Max Beerbohm tells of a ruffian who puts on the mask of a saint in order to

woo a saintly girl. He succeeds in his quest, only to run into his former villainous friends some years later. They set about trying to unmask him and reveal his true character as a hypocrite. As they tear off the saintly mask, they are amazed to discover that this former villain's face has conformed to the mask and that he now has the visage of a saint himself. He has acted himself into a new way of being. Research seems to prove that by changing your behavior, by changing how you act, you can change how you think. Maybe what we need to do is to practice Christmas joy every day.

Most of you here this morning more than likely were here last night, or at another Christmas Eve service. This is two days in a row now that you have been acting out Christmas joy. You have begun the process to live with the joy that God offers us.

Glory to God in the highest
and peace to God's people on earth. Amen.