

JOY UPON THEIR HEADS

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 11, 2016

Scripture: Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

I want to begin with two very different pictures of life in order to shine a light in the midst of the darkness of these days of late dawn and early sunset... these Advent days.

The first description is from J.D. Vance's look at rust belt America, the part of Appalachia that he knew growing up and that he describes so vividly in his autobiography **Hillbilly Elegy**.

By sheer grit and determination, he pulled himself out of the rust belt town of Middletown, Ohio, by enlisting in the Marines and going to Iraq. He returns from Iraq with a clarity about what he wants to do with his life that sets him apart from his high school classmates and other kids who grow up in abusive, alcoholic, closed down towns. He goes to Ohio State, on to Yale Law School, marries a fellow Yale Law classmate and yet carries with him that rust belt identity which has shaped his self-esteem, his political views, and his sense of vacillating hope and despair.

But listen to the America he sees in the summer between his college graduation and his entry into law school.

The incredible optimism I felt about my own life [after admission to law school] contrasted starkly with the pessimism of so many of my neighbors [in Middletown]. Years of decline in the blue-collar economy manifested themselves in the material prospects of Middletown's residents.

The Great Recession, and the not-great recovery that followed, had hastened Middletown's downward trajectory. But there was something almost spiritual about the cynicism of the community at large, something that went much deeper than a short-term recession.

As a culture we had no heroes. Certainly not any politician – Barack Obama was then the most admired man in America (and likely still is), but even when the country was enraptured by his rise, most Middletonians viewed him suspiciously. George W. Bush had few fans in 2008. Many loved Bill Clinton, but many more saw him as the symbol of American moral decay, and Ronald Reagan was long dead.

We loved the military but had no George S. Patton figure in the modern army. I doubt my neighbors could even name a high-ranking military officer. The space program, long a source of pride, had gone the way of the dodo, and with it the celebrity of the astronauts [and don't we feel the truth of that on this weekend of John Glenn's passing – having to explain the importance of his life and the daring he embraced?]. Nothing united us with the core fabric of American society. We felt trapped in two seemingly unwinnable wars, in which a disproportionate share of the fighters came from our neighborhood, and in an economy that failed to deliver the most basic promise of the American Dream – a steady wage.¹

Contrast that depressing vision of the America that has focused our national attention since the most recent election, with this vision of a people called to a different view of the future... and I'd like you to close your eyes for a moment and try to imagine the scene that I'm going to describe. Go ahead and close your eyes. You're in a safe place.

I want you to think of the desert and of desert people, Bedouins wandering the wastelands of the wilderness, pitched tents, sand storms, parched, dry, barren... [pause]...

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water...

And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away....

Now open your eyes.

What a difference, between the two images just described, the wasteland of the rust belt with its sense of futility, lost jobs, menial work, closed assembly lines, the feeling that “wherever it’s happening it’s not happening here.” “Flyover country” we call it, passed by and left out, looking for a sign of hope and latching onto any perceived savior who will pay attention to them. I mean anyone, even someone who is completely opposite them.

Contrast that with the words of Isaiah who speaks of hope, of blessing and restored community, who points to a time of blossoming in the desert and flowing water, a place where there is laughter and joy.

There is little joy in the land these days. Have you noticed? No one much is really laughing or feels joyful. And even those who try to give us laughter and a sense of perspective are beaten down with oppressive criticism.

Psalm 35 which is the lectionary’s choice today is an interesting psalm for this Advent of contrasting discouragement and hopeful vision. Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament scholar, describes Psalm 35 as a psalm of *disorientation*. What Brueggemann means is that among the types of psalms that he describes, some are psalms of orientation and some of disorientation. The disorientation comes not because we’re dizzy or confused, but because there is a mismatch between our life experience and the promises of our faith.

And when we try to overlay our faith in God who is good and always watching over us with love and tenderness, when the hard times come and life is painful or frightening or disappointing, the fit between the loving God and the God who seems to have left us to our own devices can be disorienting.

I have always felt a little disoriented/manipulated by that chant that is popular in the African American churches when the preacher says, “God is good!” and the congregation responds, “All the time.” “God is good,” “All the time!”

Well God may be good all the time, but sometimes life stinks. Life is not so good and it becomes more painful to affirm God’s presence in such bleak times, as it is helpful to cling to the affirmation of that faith. Can both be true?

Brueggemann says, the church affirms God’s governance, rule and order, as a way to orient ourselves in a time of disorientation. But we sometimes do it for the wrong reason, convincing ourselves that everything will be all right “not from faith, but from the wishful optimism of our culture.”² So what happens when life doesn’t go in a good way; when our faith is denied by our experience?

Those are times when we grit our teeth and cling to a truth so fundamental that we affirm it *in spite of* what we see, not *because of* it.

Psalm 13 is like that, says Dr. Brueggemann. Psalm 86 also... and today’s Psalm 35; all psalms of disorientation when blessing is promised but curse is our experience and it appears that God has hidden God’s face.

Psalm 35 is a psalm for today’s world, for this Advent, a psalm for J.D. Vance looking for a better America in a section of the land that is rusted out and left behind.

Psalm 35 is for a people who feel threatened and rightly so, who have been attacked for wearing a headscarf on the subway and told to go back to the god-forsaken land they came from, which is ironic because they were born in Queens or Minneapolis or in L.A.

Psalm 35 is a psalm for people who fear the direction of their government in a time when it looks like the rust belt is still rusting, while Wall Street is swooning with anticipation, and vulnerable people -

minorities, women, LGBTQ persons, students at NYU and New School and so many other places, who came here to study and stayed on for good jobs may be harassed, or rounded up, or deported.

For the first time since maybe the 1960's even privileged white people are anxious about what will happen next. People are fearful across color lines, across racial and economic and educational lines. And no government of the United States should ever make its people afraid of their own government.

The forebears of this church, this Church of the Patriots, did not come to this land to flee one tyranny only to trade it for another. And Psalm 35 gives voice to a people who are not quite sure whether God has looked away.

“Strengthen the weak hands,” the psalmist says, “and make firm the feeble knees, she implores. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.”

This is the God the psalmist offers in a time of disorientation, a God who comes to make things right when things are wrong. A God who will judge and will hold us accountable, and yes, even though we don't like to hear it – God will bring terrible recompense. You don't hear that every week from this pulpit, but you have called me to preach the gospel, and sometimes the gospel is sobering as well as hopeful because sometimes what is best for us to hear is hardest for us to hear.

This past week, Nicole Stansifer, Dr. Senecal-Davis, and I went out to Queens. We traveled for an hour on the “F” train. I think we were still on the mainland when we stopped, I'm not sure, we were pretty far out there. 169th Street. We attended an Interfaith meeting at the Jamaica Muslim Center. I thought we should go – show the colors of the Church of the Patriots. My colleague Imam Shamsi Ali hosted this gathering of civic leaders, fellow clergy, and others, to draw strength from one another in support of our unity as people of faith.

The President of the Islamic Association spoke. The City Council member in Queens spoke, the District Assemblyman in Albany spoke, the chief of police for the district spoke, a rabbi with whom Imam Ali has co-authored a book spoke.

My friend Pastor Mandy Derr of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in the Citicorp Building spoke and said that Lutheran history was not so admirable in Germany with regard to human rights and government overreach in the 1930's, but it would not be silent now.

And I spoke.

I looked around the room and there were Islamic men wearing *kufis* on their head, Jewish Orthodox wearing *kippahs*, women wearing *hijabs*. There were priests wearing white collars, and people of good will sitting together exemplifying the greatness of America's faithfulness and strength as a nation, as people trying to honor their God and live together in peace. We didn't all join hands and sing kum-by-yah, but there was a good feeling just being together.

And we were there in part because people of faith are afraid, afraid of what comes next, afraid that no voice will be raised for justice, and that the only voices we hear these days are angry voices, voices that want to *get* somebody, make somebody *pay*, get *rid* of somebody, *send* them back, *round* them up, ignorant misguided human voices of vengeance, and recompense, and hate.

Walter Brueggemann says that the psalmist's vocabulary in Psalm 35 is the language of war and jungle, of vengeance and terrible recompense. But, he adds, that “regressive language does not lead to hopelessness” in Israel's faith, and certainly not in this psalm. Instead, faith drives us from self-reliance to God-reliance. [Because] *For Israel what is found at the bottom of the pit is not despair but the rule of God.*”³

And that should come as good news to us in these long winter days as we make ready for the winter's solstice, the shortest day and the longest night of the year. As we make ready for the one who comes as judge and as redeemer. Because it is the assurance that in spite of our presumption that God has

drifted off into a long winter's nap, God is coming to set things right in a way that we do not yet see but that God sees. And when that happens, everlasting joy shall be upon our heads.

The other evening we gathered here in this sanctuary, a small number of us in this holy space, chairs in a circle around the front of the nave, some candles, and communion. It was our annual Blue Christmas service. It's always small in number but always meaningful for renewing the soul. It doesn't need to be big. God brings those who need to be here to this place for the healing that it offers.

It takes some courage, however, to come to a Blue Christmas service, because you know just from the name of it that it bears a melancholy feeling. There will be no Santas, no ho-ho-ho's, no reindeer or brightly wrapped packages. No false hope like cotton candy, with no substance to it.

Because loss is acknowledged here. The vulnerability that we like to bolster and prop up and sandbag is unmasked instead. The merry, jolly, happy Christmas spirit is left outside for a short while and the quiet of a dimmed and candlelit sanctuary provides rest and peace from the world's withering merriment.

Here we remember the people we have lost, the hurts we have felt, the loneliness we have borne, the broken relationships that others have left with us or the ones that we have imposed, the job that we messed up, the ways we've failed the ones who counted on us.

And we sit quietly and wait on the Lord, and we sing *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* in its minor key because in spite of our broken, hurting lives, and our discouraging world, we believe that God will come and ransom us, captive Israel.

We sing those words not as a kind of kum-by-ya to cover over the worst that we know and see and feel, but because we believe as did Israel that at the bottom of the pit is not despair but the rule of God.

The psalmist points to the hope of these days which is that those who are of a fearful heart must be strong and not be afraid. Because God is coming, coming into our world with recompense and judgment, and God will make right what is wrong. Because the love of God for us, is greater than the hate and evil and deceit of the world and we know as Israel knew that "at the bottom of the pit lies not despair but the rule of God."

J.D. Vance near the end of his book **Hillbilly Elegy** suggests a hopeful sign and points us ever so subtly to that everlasting joy. He describes a moment that came during the last part of his two years in the Marines while in Iraq. He was with a unit that was supporting community outreach, which meant that his missions were composed of a small number of marines who would venture into unprotected Iraqi territory to meet with locals.

On our particular mission [he writes] senior Marines met with local school officials while the rest of us provided security or hung out with the schoolkids playing soccer and passing out candy and school supplies. One very shy boy approached me and held out his hand. When I gave him a small eraser, his face briefly lit up with joy before he ran away to his family, holding his two cent prize aloft in triumph. I have never seen such excitement on a child's face.

I don't believe in epiphanies [Vance goes on]. I don't believe in transformative moments, as transformation is harder than a moment... But that moment with that boy was pretty close for me.

For my entire life, I'd harbored resentment at the world. I was mad at my mother and father, mad that I rode the bus to school while other kids caught rides with their friends, mad that my clothes didn't come from Abercrombie, mad that my grandfather died, mad that we lived in a small house.

That resentment didn't vanish in an instant, but as I stood and surveyed the mass of children of a war-torn nation, their school without running water, and the overjoyed boy, I began to appreciate how lucky I was born in the greatest country on earth, every modern convenience at my fingertips, supported by two loving hillbillies, and part of a family that, for all its quirks, loved me unconditionally. At that moment, I

resolved to be the type of man who would smile when someone gave him an eraser. I haven't quite made it there, but without that day in Iraq, I wouldn't be trying.⁴

There it is! The direction of everlasting joy.

On this Sunday which is the Sunday of Joy, the pink candle, Gaudete Sunday, in the Advent cycle we are meant to affirm the good news that God is on the way. We believe as God's people that at the bottom lies not despair but the rule of God. And that's reason enough to rejoice in this dark time.

So strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear!

[For] The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom...

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¹ J.D. Vance, **Hillbilly Elegy**. New York: Harper Collins, 2016) 188-189

² Brueggemann, 51.

³ Brueggemann, 64.

⁴ Vance, 173.