

Awaiting the Sacred Surprise

Isaiah 61: 1-3, 8-11

John 1: 19-27

Oxford academic, author, and eventual Christian apologist C.S. Lewis wrote a particle autobiography a few years before his death. While he had grown up in a Christian household, he cast aside that faith in his adulthood, believing it to be outdated and inadequate in the amazing new world that the 20th century was revealing. But he had good friends around him who would challenge his atheism and encourage him to explore other angles and perspectives.

He admits to having defined the primary goal of his life as joy. He wanted to understand and possess it. Even the word “joy” is an approximation of the German word *Sehnsucht* which is generally translated as “longing.” For him, this “joy” was so intense for something so good and so high up that it could not be explained with words. He recounts how he is struck with “stabs of joy” throughout his life.

Different voices from friends and from his readings seem to prod and pester him and his assumptions. The voice of the herald of good news kept confronting him, making it seem as if God was pursuing him.

From Lewis's perspective, the “joy” he had so long sought would be discovered in the least likely place within the least likely circumstances. That once tired notion of Christianity, discarded as mistaken and irrelevant in the modern era, turned out to be the source of this onetime skeptic’s long sought “joy.”

Advent is like that kind of journey, going through many phases before it reaches the hoped-for destination. The name for C.S. Lewis’s book about this journey in his life’s early years: *Surprised by Joy*.

A surprise is neither what we seek nor expect. We’re pretty sure that we know what’s coming, what’s predictable, and what the outcomes are going to look like. Our typical confidence in all of this can make us a bit jaded and cynical. “Nothing surprises me anymore,” said the foolish booger who is about to get surprised.

This kind of tired cynicism is what the prophet Isaiah faces in today’s reading. Although Isaiah is listed as one volume or book, it is well established by scholars as having been written in three different time periods. Today’s reading is from the last period, known as Third Isaiah (chs. 56-66).

Third Isaiah is near the year 500 BCE. The devastating Babylonian Empire was itself conquered by Cyrus the Great of the Persian Empire. The Persians returned people to their homelands rather than enslaving them, using a different strategy with their conquered territories than what was typical. The Persians accommodated native peoples, letting them worship who- or whatever they wanted, carry on their religious and cultural customs, and maintain a loose grip on everything ... but taxation. The Persians had fewer problems from rebellions, profited from the greater amount of

commerce, benefited from a less restive and happier population. They even helped nation states rebuild.

That offer of support had been on the table for the people of Judah and Jerusalem for the re-building of the temple, but other things were distracting the people. Apparently there were plenty of bad actors who had the system pretty well rigged to their benefit. The people were suffering from the exploiters and subject to violent oppression. Hostile and narrow religious practices had also brought divisiveness to the community as people returned to the land from throughout the region, but not all were accepted.

Third Isaiah emerges as a passionate, even radical voice espousing new values and sacred promises. Third Isaiah demands inclusion of all, protection for the weak, poor, and vulnerable, and promises a reversal of fortunes for God's people.

In our reading, the prophet brings the powerful word of God:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn and to provide for those who grieve.

The pain and burden of the present time is to be transformed, and the fortunes of God's people overturned with sacred power and blessing. The condemned will be freed, sustained, and known to be blessed by their God. Those ruined and despairing will be raised up and made whole. Those forgotten and lost will be bathed in light and embraced with delight. Those lowly and despised will be robed with righteousness and crowned with the favor of their Lord.

After the Lord has announced the sacred plans for his people, the voice of the people responds. They understand the depth of their sins, having been condemned to captivity in Babylon for generations. The One who had judged them and had them taken away from the land of their ancestral Promise has defined the future now with gracious forgiveness. The people rejoice and praise God who has transformed them from a people lost and abandoned into a family of blessing with their God.

The Lord speaks for himself in vss. 8 and 9, declaring his values first:
For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.

And then God renews the historic covenant:

In my faithfulness, I will reward them, and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

The prophet concludes joyfully thankful for the promise of God that's expected to be fulfilled: *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.*

God's sacred surprise is to be anticipated by God's people, bringing transformation to their lives. Exactly how that's coming about is not disclosed. When it happens, you should see that God's values for justice and righteousness will be enacted and take force, the historic covenant of God with his people will be renewed, and the beleaguered and beset people of God will become a garden of blessings, promise, and joy. Having borne with their trials for many years now, God's declaration of good news through Isaiah has lifted the heads of God's people and caused them to look to the horizon, to embrace hope for the future, and know that their God is coming to make all things new.

Like the prophet Isaiah voicing God's good news to his people, we also have the reading about John the Baptist. We met John last week, recognizing that he was deliberately removed from the institutional religion, away from the temple in Jerusalem, out in the wilderness by the Jordan River, as well as dressed and behaving unlike any priest, Pharisee, or elder.

While he made every effort to stay away from the big city, to establish his community off the beaten track, John's ministry had struck a chord. They heard about him back in Jerusalem, and they sent some folks out to find out about John the Baptizer.

That's why our selection in John sounds like a segment of "To Tell the Truth," where celebrity panelists would ask questions of a trio of individuals, all of whom professed to be the same person with a unique story.

First, there are priests and Levites who ask him who he is. John, not telling them who he is, tells them, "I am not the Messiah." So they ask more questions. "Are you Elijah?" Elijah is expected to be the forerunner who announces the coming of the Messiah. "I am not," says John. Indeed, he may be closest to Elijah, but John's ministry is really independent of that expectation. John is doing baptisms, bringing God's people to repent, get right with God, and prepare for the coming of the Lord. But John is not announcing the coming of the Lord *per se*.

Not having an answer to take back to their bosses, the priests persist. "Are you the Prophet?" Here, "the prophet" means a prophet-like-Moses. There is a section in Deuteronomy that says God will raise up a prophet like Moses. Again, John says, "No."

Having run out of possibilities, they become exasperated and ask for some title of some kind to take back to Jerusalem. John's mystery game has been quite frustrating for the priests. John doesn't help them out much when he quotes the prophet Isaiah: *I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'.*

That answer returned to Jerusalem with the priests, but apparently it wasn't long before a group of Pharisees came out to resume the questioning along a new strategy.

The Pharisees ask, If you're not the prophet, not Elijah, and not the Messiah, why do you baptize with water? John says something like, *You are going to be so surprised when the one who is among you, whom you do not know, comes after me. He is so awesome, I am unworthy to untie his sandals.*

There is a sacred surprise in store for the Jerusalem religious leaders and elites. They don't like surprises. God doesn't really care because God likes surprises.

As the prophet Isaiah reminds God's people that God has plenty of power to transform all that they have known and experienced, so John points to the One who will also be God's sacred surprise.

C.S. Lewis in his search for joy said that Joy is like a "signpost" to those lost in the woods, pointing the way. If you've ever been lost and found a sign that answered your question about what direction you should be headed, then you know a sense of that deep joy and that sense of strength, purpose, and promise that comes from having that understanding. C.S. Lewis also would note that the sign's appearance is not as important "when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles."

May we reach out with our hearts and our spirits for that kind of joy, the joy of having found our way, the way of God's justice and righteousness, of God's new life for the faithful. God's sacred surprise is coming to us in this holy season of waiting, anticipation, and expectation. Let the joy of God's blessing come to you.