

A Promise of Liberation

Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:46b-55

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a central character of the Christmas story. That is clear, but there is so little information about her in the New Testament. Really, only Luke's Gospel brings us close to Mary, that young, peasant girl and mother-to-be under trying circumstances. In Luke, we are given a picture of the mother of Jesus, she who held him in infancy and held him again in the agony of his death.

Luke placed on the lips of Mary a vision of liberation, a vision that seemed too large for a peasant girl. It was a vision with power that seems more powerful because it was spoken by one so young. Hers was a simple voice with a clear and profound message. The child Mary was carrying, to whom she would give birth, was the living Word of God--the action of God in human history. In this child, God has acted to reverse the social order: "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." God has nullified the popular wisdom that might makes right and reflects God's blessing: "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." And God has also confirmed the ancient covenant with Abraham and reaffirmed love for all people. Through this child all the nations of the world would be blessed.

There is another vision, that of Isaiah some seven centuries before Jesus. Isaiah's vision is a pretty easy one to interpret. He said, "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." The marching orders for Isaiah's people were the same as we have today: to "strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees," to encourage and "say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.'"

God is for you! And when we act to strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees, that is when "the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped." At that point the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." When we act for justice and for peace in the world around us, especially for those who have little power in this world, and when we seek that sense of balance within ourselves and work to find and maintain clear boundaries and honest connections in our relationships, that is when "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."

Isaiah's vision was not prediction of Jesus to come some 700 years down the road. It was a statement of Isaiah's faith in God's faithfulness, in a time of national and religious crisis following the destruction and exile of the northern kingdom of Israel. Originally, the idea of Messiah involved the entire people of Israel. Only later did the concept of a single Messianic figure develop, an individual person who would lead Israel back from her exile in the wilderness of wandering, suffering and despair.

Isaiah suggested that there is even now "a highway ... called the Holy Way." This special road is for all whom God embraces as acceptable. I suspect that for Isaiah and the people of his day, the armies of Assyria and, later, Babylon would not be invited to walk this "Holy Way." They would have been considered "unclean" – outside God's circle of acceptance. But you and I live in a time when, as the apostle Peter would later say, "What God has called acceptable, let no one call unacceptable." All of us, regardless of what we've done, are accepted

This road of Isaiah's vision is for all God's people – a special road “where no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.” In other words, you can't get lost!! “No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. This is the way by which “the ransomed of the Lord shall return”--return from exile in Assyria, return from exile in Babylon, return from exile in slavery or abuse or addiction, return from exile in anger or bitterness or shame--“and come [home] to Zion with singing. Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

OK, now I have some questions for you. What brings you joy? What is it your life and experience that causes joy to well up in you?

Then, what holds you back from that joy? What keeps you stuck?

Now, one last question: What makes you free? That is the key question. There is so much in our lives and our world that binds us and imprisons us—much of it of our own making. There is our personal histories—the residue of the family systems in which we've grown up as well as the results of our own choices. Our national history of slavery, the treatment of Native Americans, and general racism. As the Christian Church we have too often found ourselves on the wrong side of these issues and actions.

Based on that history, Church seems unlikely to find a life-giving vision. But there continues to be a voice in the Church – a minority voice, a mystical spirit, at work. These are the ones who stand against the powers of greed, injustice, and violence, whose voices echo the vision of Isaiah and of Mary. This Church of peace and compassion fueled the American Civil Rights movement, the Protestant Reformation, Liberation Theology, and other freedom movements in the world. This Christian Church is very much worth seeking and joining today. The question for us is, “Will we choose the better angels of our Christian history?” Can we trust the truth of “no conditions on God's love?” Do we believe that God's salvation is fully and freely given?

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the universe bends toward justice. I believe that is true and that it also bends toward peace, freedom and love. But you would not necessarily see that just by looking around. It is not until we choose to look at the world, our community and ourselves through eyes of faith, through the eyes of God, that can we see the truth. And that truth, when we see and embrace it, sets us free.

The New Testament promises that Christ sets us free -- “The truth shall make you free.” We depend on many things to sustain life, yet life requires something of us as well—a certain response of freedom. We depend on the earth to hold us up, yet it's up to each of us to stand. We depend on the atmosphere to provide breath, yet each of us must breathe. We depend on the fields and forests for food, yet it's up to us to eat wisely and to manage our resources well.

God makes us free, but it's up to us to act on that freedom as partners with God in shaping this world in image of God's dream –*Shalom*. It is up to us to let God's dream of people, justice, freedom--the oneness of all creation become our dream as well. The Church has the responsibility and opportunity to show the world what that means to live free, and to show the world how to do it.

Fr. Richard Rohr has written:

Jesus clearly says the kingdom of heaven is among us (Luke 17:21) , that it is “at hand” (Matthew 3:2, 4:17). One wonders why we made it into a reward system for later. Maybe it was easier to obey laws and practice rituals for later than to actually *be transformed*

now. The price for real transformation is high. It means that we have to change our loyalties from power, success, money and control (read: “our kingdoms”) to leadership of Jesus and kingdom of God. Henceforth, there is only one thing that is Absolute and in relationship to that, everything else is relative—*everything*—even the church, even our nation, even national security, even our wealth and our possessions, even our identity and our reputation. Whatever you trust to validate you and secure you is your real god, and the Gospel is saying, “Will the real God please stand up?” (*Preparing for Christmas with Richard Rohr*, pp. 15-1)

The great popular musician Paul Simon wrote a catchy song a few years ago, *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover*. This song was not an inspired set of lyrics, but the bottom line was just “get yourself free.” What is true about living the freedom our faith promises and experiencing the joy, the deep joy that results from living free, is that you have to just start doing it. This is not an invitation to run away from your problems (“leave your lover”), but an invitation to start living in a way that can be powerful. This is an invitation to get to know yourself better: to confess where you’ve been hiding, admit to yourself where you’ve been playing the victim and letting the very real challenges of life keep you from becoming all you can be.

So, this is the invitation, the call, the challenge--What specific step are you ready to take that will lead you to be free to experience joy in your life? If you are clear about that step, share your commitment with someone you trust, with someone who will hold you to it.

The Christ who comes at Christmas is far more than a child in a manger. At Christmas, the spiritual power of the universe gets focused in a human life and invites us to let this Christ be born in our lives. The gift of Christmas is nothing less than the rebirth of life itself. What we pray for, dear God give us the strength to work for. Amen.

Luke 1:46b-55

⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Isaiah 35:1-10

³⁵The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say 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."

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then 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; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰And 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.