

# **New Life and Love from the Desert**

## **Sermon for Advent II – December 5, 2021**

### **Trinity Church in the City of Boston**

#### **The Rev. Dr. William W. Rich, Vicar**

#### **Opening Prayer – Sung**

O come, thou Key of David, come,  
and open wide our heavenly home;  
make safe the way that leads on high,  
And close the path to misery.  
Rejoice, rejoice!  
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.

One of the themes of this Advent season is the mysterious advent of hope and joy – and even rejoicing – in the least likely places: wilderness places and prisons. The two characters who bear this mystery to us today are St. John the Baptizer, crying out the hope for forgiveness and redeemed community in the desert of Judea, the wilderness that fills the land from Jerusalem all the way to the Dead Sea. And St. Paul the Apostle, pouring out a hymn of love and joy, imprisoned though he is, detained under house arrest in Rome, not long before his death. Both these men knew what it was like to be imprisoned, and both of them knew what it was like to give up their lives under the thumb of political authorities that felt threatened by their joy and hope, as much as by their accusations of corruption and the need for turning around, for repenting and finding a new way.

Not many of us – though far too many – are literally in a prison. But even those of us not in a cell or under house arrest, know what it is like to be imprisoned by one or more of the slings and arrows of life's outrageous fortunes. Pandemics, or bodies threatened by other illnesses. Economic hardships. Racial hatreds. Natural disasters and the degradation of Creation through climate change. Households whose hearts are broken by love gone cold, and nations torn apart by political divisions of red vs. blue, and a seeming inability to join hands to weave together a blended Advent purple.

So how do St. John the Baptizer and St. Paul the Apostle find hope in the midst of their imprisonments, and how might we find hope from them in our enclosed and despairing places?

I think they find it in two places: the hopes of histories past, and the hope that gushes up from the fountain of love, like an oasis in the desert.

First, let's look with the eyes of John the Baptist for the hope that comes from histories past. John, a good and faithful Jew, son of a Temple priest, knows his history, the history of his people, the people of Israel. John knows, despite the seeming lifelessness of the desert, that the desert is a place for hope. That God meets people in wilderness places, and brings them from those places to a good and pleasant land, a promised land. God did this first in the Exodus, as the Hebrew people fled Egypt, the place they had been enslaved, a whole people imprisoned in hopeless circumstances. God brought them out of that place into the Sinai desert, and kept meeting them there, both when they were faithful and trusting, and when they were not. When in their hopelessness, they gave up on God, and made themselves false idols – made of seemingly solid and trustworthy gold – God did not give up on them. God fed them with manna, and quail, and made water gush out of a rock for them, food and drink in a desert place, and a foretaste of the bounty they would experience.

What's more, John knew that there is something about desert times that act like a crucible. That the desert, though it seems like a lifeless place, is mysteriously a place in whose sands hide creativity and new life. Desert places allow for something strong and lasting to be forged, in a way that green and easy times do not. This hot and fiery desert time was for Israel a creative furnace, so that what might be the single most important facet of faith could be forged in them: HOPE, a hope that endures dry times, a hope that learns how to trust that God is there, and working for good, even when the outward circumstances give little or no evidence of the good that is to come. A Promised Land was waiting for them, though they could not see it. And so hope was necessary, to provide the energy to endure until the good should come into being. Hope helped them to “hang in there” until the good should come.

*Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel! [SUNG]*

And like us, besieged many times, and not just one time that threatens our faith, so Israel needed to learn how to trust in the hope God offers again and again, not just that one time in the desert of the Exodus. The very words of hope that John the Baptizer proclaims in today's Gospel come from another desert time, a time of testing that led to new hope, and the forging of an even stronger community of hope than Israel had yet known. For John is, as you can see from the quotation marks in the Gospel reading, harking back to the words of Isaiah, the so-called Second Isaiah who proclaimed hope to Israel in another desert time in their life, the desert of the Exile, a time marked by Israel's defeat by the Babylonian Empire, the utter destruction of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, and the carrying off of the people into Exile. But in the face of these traumas, when Israel might have felt deserted by God, Isaiah writes with hope, and determination. Isaiah, speaking for God, proclaims that God will go before the people of Israel like a cavalcade of bulldozers, to clear the way for their return home from Exile. Mowing down mountains, and raising up valleys, and making the road home a smooth, not a crooked one, so that no one need stumble in hopelessness as they hurry home to rebuild the community of faith on their home ground.

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How are they to do that? To rebuild their community of faith? John adds a word of clarity about that. They must repent, literally in the meaning of the Greek word *metanoia*, they must literally turn around, and go a new road. A road not of hopelessness and fear, but a road of hope and courage. They must change their minds, exchanging a mind traumatized by the hurts of all the losses and upheavals of Exile, and in its place find a mind of courage and hope, trusting that God is leading them – once again – into a new life, a new land, a new home.

Now I know, and I trust that you know too, that to turn around, and to exchange one mindset, one heartset for another, after a time of loss and upheaval, is far from easy. So how are we to do that? I think in this St. Paul, imprisoned in Rome, under house arrest by the imperial guard, has a word to help us know how to exchange healing in place of trauma, and joy-filled hope in place of fear. His word is love, in Greek *agape*. *Agape*, that love which seeks the good for others, and basks in love, trusting that unselfish, divine love to be the foundation for all life, no matter what the outer circumstances of life – imprisonment, exile, or any other trauma. And how has Paul found this love? In his own words, he has found that love and goodness, not in a romantic relationship, and not in the gold from the

mines for which the city of Philippi was well known, but first in Jesus, the Emmanuel who sought him out in the midst of his murderous rages. And second, in the community of good news that he has shared – good news both given and received – with the nascent parish of followers of Jesus in Philippi. They have shared good news, that good news which Jesus came to preach, and teach, and embody in his living and dying, and rising again: the good news that God is good, forgiving, and at work to transform, redeem the whole world by the power of love, a love that can never be defeated, not even by death. That love which breaks soul-and-body open, which Paul calls compassion, has overtaken him. Love, *agape*, has changed him from a fear-filled persecutor of Jesus' followers into an advocate for Jesus and Jesus' compassion, that *agape* in which Paul discovered the power of God's forgiveness, and which for the rest of his life flowed from him – at his best – in the hope, and love, and joy that we hear him pour out to his fellow Jesus-followers in Philippi.

So from Paul and John the Baptizer, what do we learn? First, know your history. Know and remember those stories – both the ones we share in the faith and your own personal stories – the stories that remind you that hope is alive, that God is alive and at work for your good and the good of the whole Creation, that love is more powerful than whatever wilderness of imprisoning fear and troubles you are experiencing at the moment. And if the advent and triumph of that love seems slow in coming, then remember what that other prophet, Martin Luther King, said just days before he died, witnessing to that love. “The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.”\* And then reground yourself in those stories so that you can endure, holding onto hope until the time of trouble passes, and a new day of life, of a new promised time and land comes into being, and you can know that God's power of resurrection is not merely a fond tale.

And then do as Paul does with his community at Philippi. Instead of allowing your present valleys of despair to turn you into a Debbie Downer, who dumps onto others around you the hurt and fear of your present troubles, instead of that reconnect with others here in this parish, and in other communities of *agape* of which you may be a part, reconnect with them and rejoice in the love – the relationships of *agape* – that join you to one another. For that is where the Christ who came into flesh in Jesus is coming into flesh, becoming incarnate, here and now. That *agape* is alive in someone near you today – perhaps in someone you know and trust in the pew near you. But also that love is alive in others you do not

yet know, but who love you because you share the good news that God is alive, God is good, and God is love, and that God's life, goodness, and love, cannot be defeated by the present darkneses, or any other wilderness times you and our world will ever know.

*Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel! [SUNG]*

\*The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Sermon preached at the National Cathedral on March 28, 1968 (Lent V). He was assassinated just four days later.