

Matthew 11:2-15 & Isaiah 35:1-10

December 11, 2016

“Remember, Reflect, Rejoice”

- here's why we need to find our way through the season of Advent instead of just jumping ahead to Christmas
 - that hymn we just sang didn't sound very Christmas-y
 - we sang about worldly darkness
 - we sang about hell assailing us
 - we sang about needing a heavenly shield when earthly armour fails us
 - we prayed for peace in our hearts; for peace in the church; for peace in the world
 - why would we pray for all those things?
 - they are the reason we need what Christmas brings
- somehow we've gotten things upside down
 - we've come to think that we have to get all this stuff ready
 - there are all these things you have to do
 - you have to cook, bake, clean, decorate, shop
 - you have to get your life in order
- then it dawned on me ... if I could get my life in order, I wouldn't need Christmas
 - if I could achieve peace in my heart
 - if we could achieve peace in the church and in the world by our own efforts, Jesus didn't really have to come
 - no long journey to Bethlehem
 - no birth in a stable
 - no suffering ... no cross ...
- we do need Christmas, and John the Baptist can help us see why

- my question to you today is this ...is today an up day or a down day?
 - some days you feel great ... you're all content and at peace with yourself, with God and with the world
 - life goes on its merry way
 - but then, everything starts to come apart
- your dreams might come crashing down, or they might slip away slowly, but life seldom stays the same
 - when that happens, do we just resign ourselves to the inevitable?

- that this the third Sunday in Advent and it's supposed to be a day of rejoicing
 - in the midst of three sad and dreary blue candles, we lit a rose coloured one today
 - our Introit The Psalm words that set the theme each Sunday, started with these words, "Rejoice in the Lord always"
- we gather in the Lord's house today to sing of faith and confidence that God is about to fulfil his promise

- we sing of life and light and hope and peace, even as the world gets colder and darker
 - as the celebration of the birth of the Saviour gets closer, we take hold of a renewed confidence
 - we are about to hear again the good news of great joy that is for all people ...

- do you carry such confidence today?
 - is your heart filled with hope
 - if it is, do you know where it comes from?
 - if it isn't ... if you don't have that hope and confidence, how can you get it?

- if you find yourself down, depressed, despondent, well-meaning friends and family think they are helping when they urge us to “shake it off”
 - then they point you to Bible heroes of old who had unflinching courage in the face of great danger

- problem is that those beloved Bible heroes of old did flinch
 - they were beset by doubts and fears
 - they were troubled by sin and sorrow
 - they did waver and tremble

- in Psalm 103 David prays: “Praise the Lord, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits ...”
 - we don’t know the exact context or background of that Psalm, but we do know that it came at a time in David’s life when he needed to sit down and give his inner self a spiritual talking to
 - he needed to remind himself of all that God had done in the past
 - to look at the footprints of God in his life, and the lives of those who had come before him
 - he needed to tell himself one more time that God had never abandoned him before and God was not about to abandon him now
 - he needed to remember God’s past faithfulness
 - he needed to reflect on what that meant for his current situation
 - he needed to rejoice with a glad heart in the knowledge that the Lord who had helped him up to now, would continue to do so

- you need to know that David wasn't the only one who endured such struggles

- Elijah had had his Mount Carmel experience ... you want to know who the true God is, just watch this ...
 - God gave him a great victory over those who were leading God's people astray to follow false gods
 - when those same leaders turned on him and sought to kill him, life went from bright and hopeful to dark and hopeless
 - Elijah went from a spiritual high to the depths of depression
 - weary of the fight and convinced all was lost, he just wanted to die
 - he was a failure
 - he was convinced that God's plan to send a Saviour was also a failure

- so, what was God's prescription for what ailed Elijah?
 - Elijah was reminded of the power of God ... nothing and no one would thwart God's plan to send a messiah
 - but he was also reminded of the grace of God and the faithfulness of God to always do what he has promised

- Moses struggled too
 - he was a leader who exuded confidence one moment, only to wrestle with doubt and fear the next

- God's prescription for him and the Israelites ...
 - remember how I brought you out of the land of slavery with great signs and wonders
 - remember how I destroyed Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea
 - remember how I fed you in the wilderness and gave you water from a rock

- and remember how I did that despite your weakness and doubts,
your wavering and your sin
- when doubt and fear and despair welled up in Moses' heart, God
would remind him of all that past faithfulness
- remembering God's past faithfulness causes us to reflect on our
present circumstances in the light of that past faithfulness

- what is it that Paul tells us... "He who began this good work in you
will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ"
- we shake our heads and wonder how the Israelites under Moses
could ever entertain the thought that God had brought them
out of slavery in Egypt just so he could watch them die in
the desert!
- those same doubts fill our hearts too
 - God was faithful yesterday
 - and the day before that
 - and the day before that
 - but ... tomorrow ... I just don't know
- we have this high and lofty opinion of great people of faith
 - we admire their strength of faith and their ability to stay strong
in the face of life's storms
- we look at ourselves and start beating ourselves up because we're not
like them
 - when life's storms affect our sisters and brothers in Christ, we
expect them to show a little more backbone
 - and we get on their case when they don't

- there are two separate dangers here ...
 - we get all proud and full of ourselves because we can soldier on
in the face of incredible odds and rely on our own strength

-or we start following the path that leads to despair because we know deep down inside we don't have the kind of inner strength that people expect a faithful Christian to have!

-what's the cure for fear?

-what's the antidote to despair?

-what's the vaccine for doubt and worry?

-come with me to John the Baptist and see what is happening in his life ... where is his faith level at and what can he do to help it?

-John had a hard life

-like the prophets before him, he faced struggle and opposition

-some gladly took his words to heart, seeing them as God's call to repentance and faith

-they came, confessing their sins and were baptized in the Jordan river

-John was privileged to welcome Jesus to the Jordan and to see the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus, and to hear the voice from heaven

-he could testify to who Jesus is, because God had told him that the one upon whom you see the Spirit descend ... he is the Christ

-what an honour ... how happy and confident that must have made him feel

-but now John is in prison because King Herod had grown tired of John's unending call to repentance and sought to silence him

-some commentators say that John himself wasn't filled with doubt, but that he wanted his disciples to go to Jesus, lest they fall into despair after John was gone

- others think that John was himself struggling with doubts and needed his fears calmed
- John was beset with the same sinful nature that you and I have, so it should not surprise us that he needed an encouraging word
 - he needed some help to remember God's promises ... to reflect on God's faithfulness and to rejoice in God's gift of a Saviour
- is the instruction John gives to his disciples intended to help them overcome their fears and doubts, or is it for the sake of John's own fears and doubts?
 - the answer is found in Jesus' response to them, "Go back and tell John what you hear and see ..."
- John, like Elijah before him, needed to hear and see what was happening
 - God's plan would go on
 - God's work would go on
 - the day of the Lord would come
 - that's what God told Elijah when he was hiding in the cave
 - and that's the answer that Jesus send back to John
- go back and tell John what you see and hear ...
 - the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them ...
 - this is the promised time
 - Jesus is the promised Saviour
 - God's plan will go on ...
 - there will be a cross
 - there will be the once and for all sacrifice for sin
 - there will be a new heaven ... and a new earth

- our entering psalm this morning said, *“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, Rejoice”*
- we can rejoice in the midst of dark times
 - today can be the rose coloured candle day
 - we don’t need a black candle or a blue candle for days like this
- here’s a simple pattern to follow:
 - remember ... reflect ... rejoice
- remember what God has promised
 - reflect on what he has done in the past
 - rejoice that he who began this plan of salvation in Eden will bring it to its glorious conclusion
- at the beginning of his ministry, as John did his work at the edge of the Jordan, some came, confessing their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River
 - others stood aloof, convinced in their own minds that the message was for others, but not for them
 - still others rejected and fought against John and kicked against the message
- John’s message was a two-edged sword ... good news and bad news
 - Isaiah describes it this way, “Your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God”
 - there will be a separating of the faithful from those who reject the Word of the Lord
 - a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it
- there is a message of judgment against unbelief, but there is also a

message of hope, calling God's people to remember, and reflect, and rejoice

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

- John was suffering in a spiritual wilderness, dying of thirst in a dry desert ... overcome by a tremendous spirit of hopelessness

- no light, no life, no hope, no peace

- darkness and danger around every corner

- it's almost as if Isaiah is talking to John ...

- the desert shall blossom and rejoice with singing

- God will come with vengeance against those who oppress his people

- he will come and save them

- the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will jump for joy

- indeed Isaiah is speaking to him, because the cure for our worry and fear, our doubt and despair is the word and promise of God

- confidence for today and tomorrow is always built on the record of yesterday ... on God's past faithfulness

- why did God's OT people tell the story of the Passover again and again?

- why did they tell the story of the return from exile again and again?

- why do we teach our children the old, old story of Mary and Joseph, angels and shepherds again and again and again?

- if you want to escape the ups and downs of the storms of life, you need to remember the past faithfulness of God
 - you need to reflect on the grace of God that stands behind his promises ... they are not conditional on you measuring up

- you need to tell your children and grandchildren that God is faithful
 - that there is a place of refuge
 - that there is a quiet harbour when the storms of life rage

- John needed that reassuring message
 - we need that same message
 - people around you need to hear it too
 - God is faithful, God is gracious, God is good