

Matthew 11:2-11

John the Baptist sends his disciples to question whether Jesus is the One or if he should wait for another, and Jesus assures him with the example of his ministry of liberation, healing and proclaiming the Good News. Then he teaches about John's role, explaining that, as great as he was, those who embrace God's reign are greater still.
When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

As I read this passage, the words that stuck were right at the beginning: *When John heard in prison...* It's that stark reminder of how bleak things were for John. He must have had a fairly good inkling that things were not going to end well for him. So he sent his disciples to find out if Jesus, the one for whom he'd prepared the way really was the Messiah? It seems natural that, from the depths of his despair, he would want assurance that his life had not been in vain. There are many joyful words in this reading as Jesus points out to John's disciples the evidence of the kingdom breaking through.

But I'm drawn to sit, for a moment, with a man, facing the cutting short of his life, wondering if his life has been worthwhile. Hopefully, it was reported back to him that Jesus called him the greatest man born of woman, but let's remember John the Baptist, sent to prepare the way, spending his last days in prison. (Rev Liz Crumlish, Church of Scotland)

COCU 3A Advent 3A

The invitation to find fullness of life in the commonwealth of God resonates through all of this week's readings. God's grace and love cover and protect those who seek God's reign, and God guides them – provides a 'way' for their journey – bringing them joy and gladness as they enter God's home. The journey, though, is not easy, even though it is protected. It is a journey requiring patience (James), and in which the poor, the needy, the vulnerable and the weak are to be served and protected – for these are the marks of God's reign, both in those God 'chooses' (like Mary) and in the Messiah God's people seek to follow (as in Matthew's Gospel). Ultimately, though, those who endure and stay on the path will find an end to their suffering (and that of those they have served) and eternal joy. What an awesome vision!

The Lectionary this week also calls us to consider joy as the mark of true faith, of spiritual maturity and of true justice-bringers. If our work for justice and peace, for compassion and grace brings no joy - to us or to those we serve - we do not really bring liberation. But, when we can dance and sing, and draw others into the celebration, we have truly become life-givers, and reflections of the Christ who was not only a man of sorrows, but also a man of celebration and joy.

What does the word "Joy" mean in a world of suffering, inequity, war and terrorism, and climate change? In what ways can God's reign be seen as an invitation to joy for the weak and vulnerable of our world. Sometimes joy is seen only as a distant hope awaiting us after death, and historically this joy has been inspiring and sustaining for the exploited and poor. However, sometimes this promise of joy has also been used to excuse injustice in this world. Joy must be embraced, then, as both a goal for us to work for - the quest for 'a home' for all people, and for peace and equity to flood our world - and a characteristic of those who do this Christ-following work. God's reign is seen in the way God's people find joy in whatever circumstances they face, and it is seen as they spread joy around them through healing, uplifting, and proclaiming Good News. Our call then is to be cheerful, but firm, activists, identifying the places in our world where joy is being robbed, and challenging the unjust "killjoys" in our society, while joyfully serving those who mourn and grieve. This is the call of Jesus' example, of Mary's song, of Isaiah's promise and the Psalmist's celebration. It is also the source of patience and hope as we wait for God's reign to be fully realised, both in this world and the next.

(Source: John van de Laar, *Sacredise*)

Psalm 146:5-10

A celebration of the God who helps those in need – the poor, the blind, the prisoner, the bent over, the widow, the orphan – and who trips the wicked up. The Psalmist not only speaks of hope in God, but highlights the signs that confirm the transforming presence and spirit of God.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith forever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind.

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down/
the LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the strangers;
and upholds the orphan and the widow.

But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.

Praise the LORD!

(alternate reading to the Psalm)

Luke 1:46b-55

Mary's song of praise to the God who has chosen her, even though she is lowly, and who helps and sustains the weak and needy, while opposing and bringing down the rich and powerful.

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

Isaiah 35:1-10

God's promise to restore God's people, creating a land of peace and prosperity for them, and providing a safe and sure way for them to return home, guaranteeing their arrival in God's Zion where they will find gladness, joy and an end to their suffering.

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 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. Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 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." 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; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. A 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. 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. 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.

James 5:7-10

James reminds us of how the prophets were faithful in the midst of suffering, waiting for God to restore the fortunes of God's people. But I am agitated by the notion of patience today. It seems too passive an attribute for today's world. It also feels too much like a get-out. Instead, I want to be impatient. Impatient for God's reign to be evident. Impatient to see change. Impatient to see an end to poverty and oppression and injustice and war... Patience simply doesn't cut it today. And yet...isn't it possible to work for justice, to feed the hungry, to alleviate poverty while patiently waiting on God? Isn't that a valid way of being patient? (Rev Liz Crumblish, Church of Scotland)

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient.

Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.