

Third Sunday in Advent – 2022

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-11

Matthew 11:2-15

I grew up in Oregon, the Willamette Valley, real close to the 45th parallel – halfway between the Equator and the North Pole. It's certainly pretty in the spring and summer; not so much in late autumn and winter. In fact, it can be a dreary place. The days are short in winter. During basketball season, I would walk to school in the dark and walk home in the dark. It rains in the Willamette Valley – a lot. The sky is perpetually gray in the winter. In 1971 there were no fences, just open yards. My neighborhood was one, big, continuous, beautiful, soggy, open yard. A boy with energy gets to know the neighborhood; the dogs, the sidewalks, the shortcuts, the creeks, the friendly folks, the not-so-friendly folks and the yards – the places to hide when it comes time to play kick-the-can.

One yard is etched in my memory. One unique, glorious, mystical yard will forever be for me a source of childlike wonder. It isn't just the sky that is gray in winter in Albany, OR. It's gray to your left, gray to your right, gray in front of you and gray behind. You get used to it. Your shoulders droop just a tad, your eyes grow a bit dull, but you plow through. And then, one day, you pass by the yard. Out of the blue, unexpected, overnight, in the midst of all the gray, the yard had been transformed. Everything else was the same gray; but the yard! A sign; renewal and hope and transcendent color was bursting out of the yard. It was exploding with flowers – right in the middle of the soggy, manicured grass. On Saturday, nothing; nothing but the same gray horizon, the same rain falling from the same sky, the same endless winter, and then, on Sunday, a hundred flowers with colors so grand it made your eyes pop. Crocus; a zillion of them! The recluse on the corner had planted a hundred crocus bulbs in his yard. They bloom overnight; a radically early sign of spring. The sight of them, in the midst of all that gray, is pure joy. The first sign of spring, in the midst of that gray winter, makes your heart dance.

John was in prison and the gray landscape crept into his heart. Prison; God's prophet was in prison. John had seen the Lord's Christ. John had baptized the Messianic King and seen the Spirit descend on Jesus in the form of a dove (Luke 3:22). In humility, John had said: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Matthew 3:14). John *knew* that Jesus was the One. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). John announced to everyone within earshot: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). I am not worthy to carry His sandals (Matthew 3:11). John *knew*... here is God's atoning sacrifice; here is the One who brings the eternal reign of the Lord God Almighty. The Father had revealed all this to John in an unmistakable way. When he had baptized the Lord Christ, John heard the Father's voice, directed to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). And now John was in prison.

John couldn't shrug off the truth. Herod was defying the living God. In violation of Mosaic Law, King Herod had taken his brother's wife, Herodias, who was actually Herod's niece. Herod had taken an unlawful wife and John denounced him (Luke 3:19). Herod was a vengeful precursor to cancel culture and Herod had John confined to prison (Luke 3:20). The gray, bleakness of his cell – how could it not creep into his heart? God's prophet sat in jail for nearly

two years. Uncertainty wrestled with his faith. “What’s going on?” “Is this right?” “Could I have been wrong?” John sends two of his disciples to ask Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Matthew 11:3). Make no mistake; John hurt. Isolation is one thing; bewilderment is quite another. When faith’s certainty begins to dissipate from your heart, you hurt. John needed God’s Word. Like plants need water, like the earth needs the sun, like the stomach needs food – John needed to hear the Word. The question bespeaks John’s humanity: “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Do you know that feeling? Have you asked that question? Have you ever put out an S.O.S., a plea for strength, a request for assurance? I received a text on Friday that read this way: “Louava’s condition is rapidly getting worse and she is not expected to survive much longer.” I read between the lines. The text actually read, please come! I was immediately in motion. I have seen the Widemans multiple times in the last few weeks. Troy was in and out of the ICU and Louava struggled at home. On Friday, I entered their home and saw this dear Christian woman painfully thin and in a hospice bed. I was there because I love them but I was there to do one thing – to speak the Gospel. Louava is being tenderly cared for by her daughter – a service of great love. Troy can’t hear except through headphones and some sort of audio magnifier. The Wideman home had that gray pallor of John’s prison cell. Implicitly, they wanted to hear what John wanted to hear. You’ve known gray days. You betray someone’s trust whom you love and there’s no hole to climb into. A broken relationship barks at you. Loneliness rings your doorbell and you must answer. None are impervious to the grayness of living in this fallen world.

When John’s question arrived at Jesus’ ears, He knew precisely what John needed. “Go and tell John what you hear and see” (Matthew 11:4). It was not an obscure message, clouded in riddles. There were signs, beautiful signs, prophetic and impossible to contrive signs. “Tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (Matthew 11:4-5). Jesus was quoting Isaiah to John. Jesus was quoting one prophet to another – the gray of this fallen creation is broken by a new reality: Your God *has* come! Into the dreary prison of John’s captivity came the bloom of the crocus. The Gospel, the Word of grace and divine presence and divine action and divine love and divine authority. Jesus sent those disciples back to speak the Gospel to John. What does it do? What does the Gospel do? It strengthens us. “Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who have an anxious heart, ‘Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you’” (Isaiah 35:3-4).

Gray was all around John and the Gospel brought hope, vigor of heart, newfound trust – the crocus were blooming straight out of his prison floor. That is what the Gospel does. You come here week after week for one reason, to hear what is true, to hear of divine grace, divine presence, divine action, divine love, divine authority. You come here to interact with Christ the King and His Word and His Life. You need this Word for this sinful world and your sinful nature is gray, colorless, empty. The Word of God brings life. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – the Word brings the fruit of Christ’s life, the color of Christianity. Are you planting crocus in your lawn for others to see? What I mean is, do you speak the Gospel? You have your weak knees strengthened by God’s Word. Do you assist others?

Jesus performed those signs so that all might know – your God has come. He comes to bring a new creation. When Jesus was crucified, the burning sands of our sin became a pool of forgiveness and peace (Isaiah 35:7). His blood brings that new creation. He was planted in the earth in death. The bulb of His corpse was to bloom on the Third Day. He rose! Bursting from the tomb, nothing can stop the Son of God rising out of the gray of our death and bringing new life to sinners. Christ is in bloom in our age. No amount of unbelief or a cancel culture can rob us of the crocus of Christ. Do you believe that John was pleased to receive this Word? Do you think that John's joy at receiving this Word is precisely why this episode is in the Scripture? John died a martyrs' death. Louava is being called home as we speak. What links the two of them together, and us as well? The vigor and triumph of Christ! "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice" (Philippians 4:4). "The Lord is at hand" (Philippians 4:5).