

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8,19-28
Psalm 126

Nothing spectacular happens by accident. The student who graduates first in the class didn't get there by accident or fluke or luck. The man or woman who becomes a CEO didn't get there directly from a job in the mail room. The men who walked on the moon didn't get there accidentally. Anyone who has ever achieved anything spectacular didn't do it by themselves and they didn't do it overnight. All the spectacular events that we can think of happened as a result of teamwork and lots and lots of planning and just plain hard work. No one does it alone.....apparently, not even Jesus.

The Scripture readings that we just hear are dripping with Good News. These are some of the most uplifting and hopeful passages in all the Bible. We begin with the reading from Isaiah who speaks with the passion of a prophet. This passage was written shortly after the Israelites returned to their beloved land after their exile in Babylon. The brightest and the best of the Jews had been conscripted by the Babylonians and forced into exile and forced into working for their captors. They had grieved their lost land for decades and have now been allowed to 'go home.'

The prophet Isaiah speaks about all the hopefulness of rebuilding their homeland and all the wonderful things that will be done for people and by people. They will be rebuilding and restoring. This is the passage that Jesus read in the Synagogue when he began his ministry. After he finished reading, he put the scroll down and told the assembly that they were looking at the fulfillment of this prophecy even as he spoke.

What happiness we have to anticipate! And this is still the time of anticipation ... the time of waiting. We're waiting anxiously because we know that something good ... really good ... is about to happen. Something spectacular is about to take place. There is a promise at the end of this passage in Isaiah and it is this: "For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." It's God's promise of the One to come ... the One we are waiting for anxiously. We are looking forward to this coming of the Righteous One because we know that God always keeps promises. We have no need to fear being let down. While the

believing is sometimes as struggle for each of us, it's not the hardest part. The hardest part is in the waiting. We have been waiting over 2000 years for our Lord to return to us and to bring his kingdom to earth. Sometimes we get impatient. Sometimes our faith wavers. Maybe he isn't going to come at all. But then we remember. Our concept of time and God's concept of time are quite different. A thousand years could be like one day to God. And then our hope returns because we know historically and through our own experiences that God keeps promises. And so we wait.

And we relish in the joy expressed by the Psalmist in Psalm 126. We have so much to look forward to as we listen to the psalmist describe what it was like for Zion ... Jerusalem ... to be restored. Shouts of joy! Those who sowed with tears will reap with joy! The Lord has done great things for us. What great hope there is within us as we sing these words of the psalmist. How much we know about destruction and desolation. And how much we trust in God's dream of restoration and rebuilding.

All of scripture is about God's love for his creation. It's about his longing for connection with the creatures He has made. It is all about God pursuing humanity ... Israel in particular ... but *all* of humanity in reality. We hear again from Paul in his letter to the church in Thessalonica that they are to rejoice always...and in all things. Sometimes that's so very difficult. It's so easy for us to feel abandoned or betrayed or disappointed by a God that we want to believe cares for us ... cares for every hair on our head. But we can't see the larger picture. We can't see what God is dreaming about in the midst of creating. And God is creating still ... even today. Paul warns the church in Thessalonica not to quench the Spirit. Don't try to shut people up who are speaking prophetically about God and God's intentions toward the world. He reminds these early Christian believers ... also impatient for the return of Jesus ... that the one who calls the prophet ... the one who calls each of us to serve him ... to be in this place at this time with this community of believers ... this one who calls each one of us is faithful. God keeps his promises and God dreams right along with us about return and restoration and rejuvenation.

So we meet up with John the Baptist this morning in the gospel of John which was not written by John the Baptist, although there are Christians today who believe this it was. As a matter of fact, the Gospel of John never refers to him as John the Baptist ... just John, although he might more aptly be called John the Witness in this gospel...because the gospel of John sees that as his primary function. We see here in this gospel a John who is defining himself by what he is not. He is not Elijah, although the gospel of Mark that we heard last week certainly describes him in such a way that we might think he was. You see, it was believed ... and perhaps still is in the Jewish community ... that the prophet Elijah would return to herald the entrance of the long awaited Messiah. But John says, "No." He is not Elijah.

John also tells the messengers of the Pharisees that he's not the Messiah himself. He's not the One that everyone is looking for. But the messengers continue to press him, "Who ARE you?" And he alludes to the passage in Isaiah that we've just heard when he says, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord!" Even the Pharisees were looking and dreaming and anticipating and wondering...and waiting for the appearance of the long promised Messiah. But John assures them that he is not the light they seek. He came to bear witness to the light. John came to tell everyone that Jesus IS the One they are waiting for. He elevates Jesus and Jesus' importance when he tells them that he's not worthy to untie the thong of Jesus' sandal. Now John has quite a following in his own right, so elevating Jesus puts Jesus in a rare category.

John is, in fact, the Advance Man. John is the one making all the preparations and telling the people what they need to do to get ready for the arrival of the One ... the One who IS the Messiah... the One they are all longing for, including John. John is getting people ready ... the poor and marginalized who have dreams of being rescued from their lot and the rich and the powerful who need to clean up their way of living in order to be able to receive the One who is on the way. Everyone needs to make preparation in order to receive the Son of God.

And he's approaching. He's arriving soon. We have such a short time left to prepare before he will be with us. He's ready to enter our hearts, and our lives and our minds in ways that we never imagined possible. He's ready to salvage the world and usher in God's kingdom one person at a time if need be. He is the fulfillment of God's dream to be reconciled with His creation. But are we ready to step into that dream? Are we ready for not only our lives, but our souls, to be transformed? Is that OK with us? Is transformation OK with us? Change is hard. Are we really ready to allow God to change our thinking and our hearts and, perhaps, even our disposition?

This is what we've longed for. This is what we've prayed for. This is what we have watched the horizons of our life to catch a glimpse of. Will this happen for us ... in our time? Will Jesus return to restore God's creature during our lifetime? Will Jesus restore us in our brokenness? Will we allow it?

This Sunday we have lit the candle of Joy ... joy in the anticipation of what is about to happen. Joy down to our bones knowing that we are part of God's dream for us ... for all of humanity. God had claimed us and sends Jesus to show us the way... the way to be the true children of God. Jesus shows us how to be reconciled to God and to each other. We are brothers and sisters in God's family. We are part of that promise of reconciliation with God. The joy in that

knows no bounds. What's about to happen to us and to the world is the peace and restoration that God promises.

God has a dream for us and a promise that the dream will be fulfilled. And he has given us John the Baptist ... John the Witness ... to pave the way for Jesus. John prepares us for the best of what is to be. God has provided us with the best Advance Man ever to help us be sure that all is as it should be in order to welcome into our hearts and souls and minds the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

With joy in our hearts, we hear John say, "Soon and very soon, we shall see the Lord."

Thanks be to God!!!

AMEN.