“***The Least in the Kingdom***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Dec. 15, 2019

**Isaiah 35:3–7**

3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with terrible recompense. He will come and save you.” 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 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.

**Matthew 11:2–11**

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” 4Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5the 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. 6And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”

7 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? 8What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. . . 11Among 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.”

This saying about John being the greatest, yet everyone being great er than John, is a paradox. Many statements in the Bible are paradoxes or puzzles of some sort. This is one of many cases where you *cannot* understand Jesus if you are completely literal minded. Jesus forces you to use your imagination, to be flexible and even *playful*. Here’s the rule: “Thou shalt be creative and imaginative.”

Let’s try that out. The easier part is to realize that no one was greater than John the Baptizer in that no one was more brave or honest or dedicated. How, then, can all of us in the kingdom be greater than him? Has Jesus painted himself into a corner? No, it is a paradox that we need to solve. It has to mean that we have been *given* something greater, or are somehow more blessed. In fact, we have been given the gift of the Spirit poured out on Pentecost. John was killed before that day, so he did not receive it. We tend to take this gift for granted, since we’ve always had it. But it is a world-changing gift, and all of us who live in Jesus’ kingdom are living in a *new age*.

The outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost inaugurated a New Age. We are “greater” than John in that we live in the age *after* the Spirit has come. In chapters 14 and 16 in the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus telling his apostles, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything” (John 14:26). “When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). We can be spirit-led in a way that John was not, that is, with the Spirit specifically sent by *Jesus*. There is a Jesus-spirit in the world that wasn’t here before. There is a certain kindness and sensitivity that Christians can show, that was not commonly found in the ancient world. With that gift we can really become change-makers in the world.

It is potentially a world-changing spiritual gift, although its effect is only noticeable in groups where this Spirit is allowed to thrive, usually quietly and without any promotional fanfare. It has nothing to do with aggressive evangelism, slogans, rituals, or political views. It is a spirituality that does not brag, does not put down other religions, does not pick fights, but which instinctively does good, and experiences an unforced joy and peacefulness.

We can sense this when we notice how our faith in Jesus has changed our lives, has made us more sensitive to spiritual *yearning* and *need* in ourselves and others, and more responsive to truth and spiritual beauty. That should give us joy.

There is the guy who did a jail term for theft. While in prison he found Jesus. He allowed his life to be changed, and carried it on into his post-prison life. One day he saw someone drop his wallet. Without thinking, he picked it up and gave it to the guy who dropped it. Later, he had a great feeling of joy, when he realized how profoundly he had changed. It had not even *occurred* to him to keep the wallet.

Joy is our Advent theme today, and Isaiah speaks of joy, too: “the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus” (Isa 35:1). Surprising growth and beauty produce joy. More than this, Isaiah sees the world being utterly transformed, with streams of water flowing in the desert, with the lame leaping like a deer, with the dumb singing for joy, and the deaf hearing (35:5–6). Is it a prophecy of what Jesus would do, or is it the anticipation of a final transformation that hasn’t happened yet? Or maybe a bit of both?—foreseeing some things that the Messiah *did* fulfill, and seeing others that are still future to us? “The eyes of the blind shall be opened.” That certainly sounds like the gospel. Or is it symbolic, meaning a dazzling awakening to *spiritual* understanding, “seeing” in the sense of knowing? You be the judge. With God and people working together, anything is possible.

Rather than give a direct answer to John’s question about his Messiahship, Jesus points to results. People have seen most of everything they could have expected from the Messiah or the Messianic reign. They’ve seen the blind healed, lepers cleansed, and the poor—the neglected—hearing good news (Matt 11:5). These things are evidence that the New Age has begun. For some people, the spiritual transformations they saw were proof enough. Others needed to see miracles.

In our age, hopefully we can see that spiritual transformations are more important than physical miracles. We have spiritual opportunities people never had before, but we aren’t always good at bringing these to full fruition. I’m not very good at it. Why? Probably a combination of reasons: shyness, bookishness, fatigue, disappointment. My excuses are real, but they are not very good. I need to love, to serve, to preach more effectively, to be brave, to risk rejection, to show my true self. I’ve been given the Spirit of Truth, and it will lead me into all truth. That partially refers to intellectual insight, but more essentially to *living* in a way that conforms with the goodness, beauty, and love that I have found. I need to *appreciate* these blessings more fully. I should be astounded every minute, or, as a book title by C. S. Lewis says it: *Surprised by Joy*.

How will the Spirit of Truth change you? Will it empower you? Will it surprise you? Rejoice in the knowledge that you have spiritual help, *inward* help. Stop and think about that, during the day. It’s not hard to be surprised by joy. What a gift we have, even if we are “the least in the kingdom”! The gift itself is the greatest.