

Rejoice in the Lord Always

Isaiah 65:18

Be glad forever and rejoice in what I create; for I create Jerusalem to be a joy and its people to be a delight. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people.

Rejoice, joy in God, celebrate God's presence and power in your midst. God has not forgotten you; God will come to deliver you. These are but some of the words the prophet Isaiah seems to be saying to the people of Israel. Speaking in the context of the people of God still in Babylon, and, day by day losing hope that God would deliver them, the prophet brings words of assurance to a people in the midst of hopelessness. Rejoice, says the prophet; claim the joy you have in God. God has not forgotten you. To reinforce the need for the people of God to rejoice, despite the reality confronting them, the prophet emphasizes five reasons for his suggestion.

First, God will come to save the Gentiles or non-Jews. God does not discriminate against those who desire to offer worship. Non-Jews expressed an interest in worshipping God and the prophet, as God's spokesperson, points to God's power to save both Jews and non-Jews alike. Second, God will punish those with a rebellious spirit. The people of Israel rebelled against God. God punished them and God will save them because they are children of God (65: 2-7). Third, God will save even a remnant or faithful group to carry on God's purpose of salvation. Faithful

Jews in exile need not fear the death of the tradition. On the contrary, God's nature is to save people from destruction and a remnant from Israel will survive to give this testimony (65: 8-10).

Fourth, God's judgment will accompany those Jews who reject the path of righteousness (65:). God's judgment means following God's way, which leads to righteous living, while rejecting God's way leads to negative consequences. Finally, a life of joy and happiness (blessings) is reserved for those who remain faithful to God (65:17-25). That is, God rewards those who live out God's purpose in their lives. It is on this life of joy and happiness that I wish to focus our attention for our meditation this morning.

In the same way the prophet invites Israel to rejoice, despite their state of alienation in exile away from home, in a similar way people of faith are invited to rejoice and be glad despite the challenges confronting us in the present. People of faith in Jamaica, for example, cannot be naïve to the fact that tough times are ahead on the economic and social front. On the economic front we will have to return to fulfilling the terms of the IMF agreement we signed last year. Such return will mean stringent measures to curtail expenditure, encourage growth and provide opportunities to pay our way out of debt. On the social front, those who lose jobs will be seeking ways to make adjustment to a new way of life. Business owners, challenged by the tough economic times, will be seeking ways to do business differently in order to survive. Property owners will be looking out for more ackee thieves to bring them to prosecution. What is there in all of this to rejoice about, you may ask?

In the December 3, 2011, publication of the *Economist* magazine there is an article entitled, “Good tidings from the South.” The title caught my attention because the first two words form part of the Christian message for Christmas. The phrase “Good tidings” forms part of the wider message of the angel to the shepherds concerning the announcement of Jesus’ birth. In St. Luke 2:10-11 we read, “The angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid; I am here to bring you **good tidings**, great joy for all people. Today a Saviour has been born to you.” I was therefore struck by the title of the article as it points to a reason to rejoice despite the global economic recession.

“Social progress in Latin America” is the sub-title of the article. It points to the fact that while poverty in Europe and North America is on the increase, recent statistics show that the level of poverty in the south is on the decline. The figures show poverty levels at 30.4% for 2010 when compared to 48.4% in 1990. Though the writer acknowledges that the figures are not very precise, as the population in the region has seen significant increase over the period, there is nevertheless some indication that living standards are generally improving. Additionally, the writer notes, poverty levels are declining because the disparity in income levels is coming closer together.

A key factor driving the shift in income disparity is the increased level of higher education being accessed by Caribbean and Latin American people. In this respect, the writer argues, while the numbers continue to show women as benefitting less from the shift in status, nevertheless, people in the region have every reason to hope for better living conditions in the future.

For the writer of this article, people in the region can affirm the words of the prophet Isaiah. People in the region can rejoice. We can take joy in the fact that despite our challenges we are making steady progress towards greater success for all our people. Such progress, the writer notes, will not come without further challenges. For example, economic growth in the region is not expected to go beyond 3.5%; higher food prices will mean poverty will continue to be a challenge, especially in places like Brazil, Mexico and Haiti; and, families living in poverty, with large numbers of children, will continue to pose challenges. Notwithstanding, the writer argues, good news abounds on the economic and social fronts and for this we can rejoice.

What does it mean to rejoice? A basic definition of rejoice is to be glad. This meaning is captured, for example, in the words of the Psalmist who says, "I was glad when they said to me, let us go to the house of the Lord" (Ps. 122:1). Gladness here suggests people of goodwill, on their way to worship, ought to invite others to share in the wealth of their experience. In other words, for the Psalmist, there is a need for people to flood their lives with "whatsoever things are good." Similarly, the Psalmist says, the invitation to worship with others brought gladness to the spirit as it was a joy to socialize and worship with those who are focusing on the path of Godliness or righteousness. To rejoice, therefore, is to flood one's life with things that are good. Such good things will infect others even as we dispel cynicism and negative comments.

On this third Sunday of Advent, as we move closer towards Christmas, we are being encouraged to rejoice. We are to rejoice because, beyond the

challenges confronting us, is the reality of God's goodness in our midst. Our gospel reading for today describes the goodness of God in our midst as Light. In St. John chapter 1:6-7 the writer says, "A man came from God; his name was John. He came to bear witness, as a witness to introduce the Light so that all might believe through him." The writer of John's Gospel, like the prophet Isaiah before him, and the writer of the article in the *Economist* magazine, points to the presence of good news in the world. This good news is Light for those who wish to flood their lives with gladness. So, while there are people who are seeing nothing but darkness as the global recession marches on, Christians are invited to see and focus on the Light of God in our midst. Like the Psalmist, we are invited to be glad and to invite others to share in this gladness or goodness.

Rejoicing in the Lord is the call of all people of faith. With this message we can learn from a service in a Presbyterian church in Omaha, in the United States. People were given helium filled balloons and told to release them at some point in the service when they felt like expressing the joy in their hearts. Since they were Presbyterians, they weren't free to say "Hallelujah, Praise the Lord." All through the service balloons ascended, but when the service was over, approximately 1/3 of the balloons were unreleased. Now it could be that the service was rather boring for the 1/3 that chose not to release their balloons. Nevertheless, let us allow our hearts to rejoice by letting go our balloons of gladness which God is giving us this day and always.