

Sermon 12.11.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Third Sunday in Advent, Year A

Isaiah 35:1-10 | Psalm 146 | James 5:7-10 | **Matthew 11:2-11**

I'm not a big fan of baseball, but there's just something about going into the bottom of the ninth when the game is close. At the end of the game you're playing for keeps, and often the outcome of the game is determined by who bats last. It's the same way in football, where a lot of games are decided by which team has the ball last. When we get into arguments, most of us try to be the one to get the *last word* in. In political debates, all the candidates want to have the closing remarks. Going last can be powerful and important.

Last summer I went to a Phillies game with Bob Adams, a member of our congregation who died last year. Bob had been sick for a long time, and it was basically a miracle that he was able to get out and go to a baseball game. It was a hot day, and – I know it's shocking – the Phillies weren't playing very well. It was the bottom of the ninth, they were down by one, and it seemed like the game was over, so we started heading towards the car.

As we were walking away from our seats, we heard a loud crack and then a roar, and we turned around in time to see the ball sailing back, and back, and back, until it went over the fence and the crowd went crazy. Someone was already on base, and the home run was enough for the Phillies to win. Bob was so excited. It had taken until the very end, but because they batted last, the Phillies won. It was amazing.

This morning's readings remind us that when it comes to our lives, when it comes to the world, when it comes to the future, God bats last. Sin and death and evil and injustice have their time, they may sometimes seem strong indeed, and often it might appear as if they've

won, but God bats last. And that means that grace, that love, that healing and wholeness and peace and justice and goodness will have the final word and victory. Always and forever.

Today is traditionally known as *Gaudete Sunday*. In Latin, the word 'gaudete' means 'rejoice,' and for centuries this third Sunday in Advent has been known as the Sunday of *joy*. After all, Advent is a period of preparation and waiting and repentance and after a while it can feel kind of gloomy and depressing. This Sunday is meant to be a break, a chance for us to remember the *joy* we have as God's people.

Do you feel joy this morning? Only you can answer that question, but I know that for many people, the answer is 'no.' This is a *hard* time of year for a lot of folks. The holidays can be incredibly stressful, full of demands that are exhausting and overwhelming. For some of us, this time of year is difficult because we spend so much time with family, which can easily lead to tension and arguments and frustration. For others, this time of year is hard because it reminds us of family and loved ones who are gone and whom we miss dearly. Plus it's getting dark earlier, and it's getting colder, and a lot of people struggle with feelings of depression during the winter months. Maybe you feel joy this morning, and maybe you don't.

Either way, it's powerful to recognize that our readings this morning are about having a sense of joy even in the midst of struggle and doubt. We tend to think that *joy* means feeling wonderful, that it means everything is perfect, but I think we often confuse 'joy' with 'happiness.' Happiness is a feeling that's largely based on the conditions around us. In the movie *The Giver*, Jeff Bridges says, "*Feelings are just fleeting. On the surface. But emotions, they're very deep. They linger [even if] you might not understand where you are or what's happening.*" Henri Nouwen, a famous author and theologian wrote that while happiness is

dependent on external conditions, joy *“is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing – sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war, or even death – can take that love away.”*

There’s a difference between feelings and emotions. Between happiness and joy. No one feels happy all the time. It’s impossible. But joy is something that can endure beyond our current feelings, that sustains us during times of trial, that remains even during hardship. Joy can transcend what we’re going through or experiencing at any given moment. And as Christians, our joy is based on the simple fact that God bats last.

That’s what the Israelites needed to hear in our first reading from Isaiah this morning. The passage is full of joy and dancing and singing, but at the time it was spoken the Israelites were feeling the exact opposite. When this passage was written, the Israelites had been conquered by the Babylonian Empire and were living in exile. Their temple had been destroyed. Their country had been ripped apart. They began asking if God had abandoned them. If this was the end for their people. They wondered if evil and war would have the final word.

And so Isaiah spoke these words to give the people hope. He told them a time of great joy was coming, that they would go back to the promised land, that their exile would end and they would return to their homes singing and laughing and dancing with joy. He said the joy would be so great that the desert itself would bloom. These words brought people hope in the midst of a hard and difficult time. It helped them to live with joy, reminding them that God would have the final word. That God would bat last.

It’s the same thing that John the Baptist needed to hear in our Gospel reading this morning. Last week we read about John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus, calling people

to repent because God's kingdom was coming near. But today's reading has jumped forward a few chapters. Now John is in prison for standing up to King Herod and holding him accountable for the evil he had done. He's been in prison a *long time*, because Herod couldn't let him go, but he also couldn't bring himself to kill someone so holy. (Mark 6:17-20) John had gone from superstar prophet to desperate prisoner, and he was beginning to doubt whether it was worth it, beginning to doubt whether Jesus really was the Messiah. So he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one, or should we wait for someone else?" (Matthew 11:3) It's comforting to know that even John the Baptist had doubts, just like we do.

And in return, Jesus sent back a simple message: the blind can see, the lame can walk, the deaf can hear, lepers are made clean, and good news is coming to the poor.

I wonder how John reacted when he got this message back. It's possible that he thought, "Yea, that sounds great Jesus, but how does that help me? I'm still stuck here in prison!" But I don't think so. I think John remembered this passage from Isaiah, where God promised that a time of joy was coming when the eyes of the blind would be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, when the lame would stand up (vs. 5-6), and he realized that Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise. That the time of great joy was finally here, because Jesus had come. Even stuck in prison, I think John had a sense of great joy, thankful that he had lived to witness God's Messiah and had the chance to see God's redemption. He had *joy* because he knew that God – not prison, not his present circumstances, not Herod, not his coming execution – but *God* would have the final word. That *God* would bat last.

Joy is not something that we can simply force ourselves to feel (Galatians 5:22), and the purpose of today's sermon is *not* to guilt or shame or convince you into feeling joyful. I know

this is a hard time of year for many of you. I know there are things in your lives that make *you* feel exiled, imprisoned, held down, hopeless, and trapped. But I also want you to know that these things don't get the final word.

These readings we heard today were spoken to people in the midst of less-than-joyful situations and circumstances. The Israelites felt despair because they were exiled in Babylon. John the Baptist felt despair because he was sitting in prison. At the time Jesus was born, most of God's people felt a sense of despair because they were ruled by the Roman Empire. And to each of them, God promised that their struggles and turmoil and hardship were not the end of the story, that a time was coming when their exile would end, when they would be free, when the kingdom would come. And God speaks that same promise today to us. To *you*.

This is what God does. God brings hope out of despair. He brings homecoming out of exile. Forgiveness out of guilt. Life from death. On the cross, God took what looked like defeat and darkness and turned it into victory and an empty grave. This is the source of our joy, knowing that God bats last and that his love and goodness will have the final word, and this truth cannot be changed or stopped, no matter what.

Whatever bondage or struggles or exile or pain you're facing right now, it's not the end of the story. Take the time each day to reconnect with the source of our joy, through prayer and Bible study, so you can be reminded. Reminded that the cancer and disease isn't the end. The fear doesn't get the final word. The strained relationships don't get final say. The slow decay of your body as your life draws closer to its earthly end doesn't get the closing remarks. The broken relationships that hurt you don't get the final say in defining you. The loss you feel, the labels placed on you, the pain you're going through – these are not life's closing

statements. Even death itself will not get the final word, because the grave is empty and Jesus is risen.

So live with joy! Let your hands be strengthened! May your knees be made firm! Be strong! Do not fear! For Jesus is coming. Love is coming, life is coming, healing is coming, peace and justice and wholeness are all coming, a time of great joy when Christ will return and the desert will bloom into beauty and the wilderness will be filled with gladness and everlasting joy will be upon us, and we shall have joy and gladness and all of our sorrow and sighing shall flee away and be no more. For God bats last. Always. Let us rejoice.

Amen.