

Third Sunday of Advent
The Reverend John H. Brock

5:30 p.m. Saturday, December 10, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come.

This last Thursday I got to take my seven year old car in for its 120 thousand mile checkup. I asked if I could wait on it because I have found that I get interrupted far LESS waiting there in the showroom than I do in my own office and I was really hoping to get my council report and maybe even some sermon preparation done. So an hour and a half into my wait the service person comes up to me and she says; "Well, the technician found a few other things with the car that we're strongly recommending that you have done." She proceeded to go through this list of seven items, and then showed me the estimate for those seven items, and NONE of which included the price of the tune-up, which was why I was there in the first place. I went through; I took out the things that really didn't matter, some of the more cosmetic things. Now on the plus side, because the repair bill was going to be so high, they gave me a loaner car. But, still it was at least twice as much as what I had anticipated paying when I had arrived there that morning.

Anticipation, good or bad. Anticipation is what Advent is about. Getting ourselves ready, reading the world around us, that's what this season is all about. That's why it's here: it's to help us to prepare for the coming of our Lord. It's not billed - slight pun intended - it's not billed as being easy. No one says this preparation comes without cost; none the less we are called to get ready.

The reading that we had from Isaiah tonight is much of the same vein. It's talking about preparing, readying, being hopeful. Most Biblical scholars think that these couple of chapters from Isaiah, chapter 34 and 35, come from the time when the Hebrew people have gotten out of the exile in Babylon and have returned to their home in Jerusalem. But after 70 years, they come back, NOT to a thriving community, not to the homes and the cities that they left, but they come back to rather a ravaged shell of a city that they once held dear and that they had been forced to abandon.

As of our reading, having returned to that shell. Some of them are probably old enough to remember what Jerusalem had once looked like. Many of them I would guess heard from parents and grandparents the splendor and joy of what Jerusalem once was. But as they stand there looking at the ruin and desolation around them, rather than singing a song of despair, rather than singing a song of loss, or a song of selfishness, a song of anger, or desperation, or wrath, Isaiah gives to them a song filled with hope and promise. A song of joy and self-**less**-ness.

Two thousand five hundred years ago Isaiah was preparing the people of Israel, Isaiah was preparing US, for Advent, for the coming of our Savior. Consider what he said: the desert shall bloom abundantly; the weak shall receive strength; the fear filled shall have their fear taken away; the blind will see; the deaf will hear; the

lame shall leap; the speechless shall speak and water shall flow, grass shall grow, and through it all shall be a highway. And not just *any* highway, but a highway that shall be called "the Holy Way."

So now think, think of that young pregnant girl, fourteen, fifteen, maybe sixteen years old, walking along that road next to her betrothed as they journey Nazareth to Bethlehem. Seventy-five miles as the crow flies, who knows how far on foot. What did they talk about? Were they fearful of the journey? Did they feel any loss of self due to their impending marriage due to the impending birth? Do they feel all that strange because of the weirdness of the extraterrestrial encounters (the angelic visitations) they both have had about this birth? Were they filled with anger over the census, or at the occupation of their country by the Romans? Or did they, maybe, in the midst of their own advent, of their own preparation, were they *maybe* not filled with the weightedness and worry of a newborn, and perhaps were they filled instead with the hope, with the joy, the expectation and the excitement that this birth would bring to them?

Now I know that this is a time of year when many of us in our own journeys struggle for various reasons. Some of us deal with Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD as it's known, due to lack of sunlight or perhaps as better said, due to too much darkness in our lives. Many of us are dealing with the stress of gift giving, of spending money we don't have, of buying things that are perhaps not truly needed or trying to figure out what it is that somebody might want anyway, and then we have to deal with the remorse of the bills, the payments. There are those of us who have suffered loss: the loss of a loved one, loss of employment, loss of health. Where do we look for things to rejoice in? That's when we hear the words from Isaiah. The words that Isaiah spoke to the people in the midst of the ruins of Jerusalem:

^{35:10} And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Their problems aren't gone; it's how they're looking at their problems that changes.

Back to my car for a minute. Turned out that evening when I got the call that my car was ready, the technician discovered some *other* problems that were only visible by doing the expensive repair job to begin with. And this new repair was pushing twice as much, if not closer to three times the repair that I just paid for. Now I am striving to hear God's voice in all of this automobile repair. I know that God is with me. I know that God is walking along side of all of us. I know that I will get through this regardless of whether I pay for the repairs or end up with an entirely different vehicle.

I am reminded of a story I used to read to my boys when they were much smaller. A story about a peasant couple who lived in a very small house in a small remote village and they desired a larger home. They asked the village wise woman to help them with this, and so she told them to bring inside with them their horse and their cow and all of their chickens. They didn't understand this, but they did it anyway. They brought all the animals inside with them. They told the wise woman 'we've

done that you said and now we're even smaller. We have *less* room.' So the woman told them, 'Go throughout the village, bring everyone into your home, throw a feast. Bring in the parents and the children and the grandparents. Have them bring their favorite pets, gather everyone into your home.' Again they scratched their heads, but they do this, they bring them all inside, they set a feast. No, it's not a fabulous feast, but it's a filling feast. There is food for everyone and there is joy and laughter too as they are all snickering and laughing as they try to sneak past one another to get past to the other side of the room or other to get over to the food. People are hanging from the rafters. Birds are flying around. Finally the feast is over, the neighbors go home, they shew out the chickens, they put the cow in its stable and the horse behind their home and as they sit down to relax, they suddenly realize that the old woman has kept her promise. Their house is indeed much bigger with all of those people gone. It was all a matter of perspective, of how they were looking at their home.

What is to me the *Most Important* in times of stress, in times of unexpected bills, of over whelming sadness, is how we look at them, and to know, to know with a *whole heart*, that God loves me. God loves each of us so much that God chose to become flesh. To become a human, finite being, and to walk here among us. I hear the words of Isaiah. I see the healing ministry that was accomplished as was reported to John the Baptizer, and I know Immanuel, God is with us.

No matter what is going on in my life, no matter what is happening in yours, know that God is with us, always.

Amen.