

St James United Church



Message for December 14, 2025

Third Sunday in Advent

“The Joy of God’s Restoration” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11; Quote from Meister *Ordinary Graces: Christian Teachings on the Interior Life*

In the United Church, we’re very used to connecting the four Sundays of Advent to the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love, so much so you’d think that we’re not allowed to reflect on anything else. We can, of course, and so I hope you’ve noticed that while I referred to Hope and Peace in the first two weeks of the season, I didn’t exclusively, instead grounding each with a theme more explicitly present in the scriptures for the Sunday. For example, on the first Sunday I highlighted the theme of waiting, an attitude that is rooted in hope, but orients us to look for God’s Reign as it breaks into the world, open to God’s presence in one another. And last Sunday I focused on being prayerfully repentant, a posture that helps make the peace we yearn for possible. Similarly, this Sunday often focuses on Joy, but what I notice in the readings is the reason for joy, that is a profound restoration through God’s grace.

This is particularly true in Isaiah where the restoration is multiple. We hear how the land flows with water and so transformed from an arid wilderness of prowling predators into a verdant field blossoming with wildflowers. This change in the landscape from a place of fear to fertility is good cause for rejoicing, especially as it points to another restoration, not ecological but social. When Isaiah was written, it was believed that the land responded to the ways of the people who lived upon it. When they acted with love and kindness, supporting others and caring for the most vulnerable of them, the land would be fertile and productive. But when injustice ruled the day, the land would grieve and turn against the people and become a wasteland. The restoration of the territory suggests that the people have changed. This is reflected in the restoration of healing as the blind were able to see, the deaf hear, those who can’t walk leaping and running. This is not necessarily actual physical healings but symbolic, the people who once closed their eyes to the plight of their neighbours, ignored the sound of their cries, immovable by hard-heartedness, responding as they always should. Which is why we hear of a final restoration of sovereignty. The people who were in exile return through God’s aid, committed to live God’s holy way again.

In this, restoration and repentance are connected. On one level, repentance is individual, but as I shared last week, it can’t stay there. We need collective repentance. Take the issue of climate, a concern made quite pressing this month on opposite sides of the world, first in Sri Lanka where there was mass flooding brought by Cyclone Ditwah, and most recently in BC as the Nootsack River overflowed its banks leaving the Fraser Valley extensively flooded for the second time in four years. These events are made more devastating by a warming planet, something we have

known for decades but still struggle to turn around. Now it's not been without effort, many of us shrinking our personal carbon footprints. But as the concentration of CO₂ continues to rise, we're reminded that we need corporations and industries to play their part, need governments too. Pundits will tell you the economy needs to take priority right now but the economy and environment are intertwined. This invites us to take a leap of imagination in how we structure our economy, on where we place our priorities. This is where we need not just personal efforts joined together with exponential impact, but shared advocacy as well. As we make structural changes, we give nature a chance to restore itself. And that is but one example. I am sure you can think of other areas where we'd do well to shift from calling on only personal changes when the issues are fundamentally structural, are really social in nature.

Because of this it feels in many ways like we are going backward in our efforts not just about the environment but in how we live with each other, and not just locally or nationally but globally. But as Meister Eckhart reminds us, we need to keep looking to God, what God is inviting us towards. I truly believe we are getting there despite appearances, that through the work of the Spirit God's Reign is breaking into our reality. We just need to be attentive. That is what Jesus was telling John via his disciples as he pointed to the healings that were taking place. These were not signs of Jesus' divinity as much as signs that God was doing something profound in the world. And I believe God has and will continue to draw us forward over time. Our role as church, as Jesus' followers, is to be a community that models the world not as it is but as God desires it to be.

The key is at the end of Jesus' message back to John, that the poor had the gospel brought to them. This was not about preaching as we assume. As New Testament professor Karri Alldredge suggests, the poor were gospelized, experienced the gospel in action. They experienced that as Jesus stood in solidarity with them, treated them as equals, shared meals with them as a reminder of how we're to share what we have with one another. In our context, we gospelize too when we visit people in prison, or in hospital, or in need of housing, when we intervene when someone is being targeted for detention, or advocate for those marginalized by oppressive policies, like the trans community is in Alberta, or religious minorities in Quebec, and act on climate issues too knowing that those of us who are poor most impacted, and to bring a bit of Christmas into this message, we gospelize as we seek to live sustainably in this season, not caught up in buying a lot of stuff we really don't need but taking time for others, gifting experiences rather than stuff, extending charity to important causes like supporting the food bank, and asking why we haven't had the structural change making food banks a thing of the past. As we do these things we are looking toward God, God's restoration being helped along.

That is the source of joy, not just for us, but for all the earth, for creation itself, made possible as we make change in our lives, changes that lead to peace, as we wait in hope not for a future reign but attentive to where God is breaking into our world right now. As we live into these virtues, we not only prepare for Christmas, but we are part of God's restoration revealed in Jesus' birth. May it be so. Amen.