**Joyful Resistance**

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

I have what I consider a little treat for you today. On a Saturday evening in early November, I was watching an episode of Saturday Night Live. Chris Rock was the guest host. Thanks to You Tube, our projector system and the help of Tom Murphy, we will begin today with an excerpt from the opening monologue given by Chris Rock. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYZLKqGhSZs>

It’s hard to picture the prophet Isaiah or the Apostle Paul as guest hosts for Saturday Night Live. Then again, we may be surprised because both Isaiah and Paul share in common with Chris Rock an unwillingness to let their spirits be damped by what looks like and feels overwhelming. Chris Rock recognizes the capacity of capitalism and consumerism to undermine and devalue virtually everything we hold sacred. Rather than throw his hands up in despair over a system that insist the value of human beings and creation should be measured by profit, Chris Rock laughs and simply says, “no bling on Jesus.” Rather than let the power of fear and our propensity toward violence cause us to lose all hope for peace in our world, Chris Rock invites us to laugh at our fears and our preference for violence by telling a story in which he concludes, “I need a gun” and “If you hear me talking about disease, I got it”.

I have no idea how Isaiah and the Apostle would do as stand up comedians on Saturday Night Live or anywhere else. But, they share with Chris Rock a capacity to resist those forces in our lives and in our world that diminish us, oppress us, devalue us, including creation. Humor, a capacity to laugh at what appears overwhelming is only one of the tools that come with what Isaiah and Paul see as a spirit able to rejoice in all circumstances.

The prophet Isaiah speaks to people who have returned from Exile to a homeland that has been destroyed. Last night Michele and I saw a documentary about abandoned and forgotten places in America. It included a once thriving resort area in California by a polluted lake that is now surrounded by discarded, run down buildings, a ship yard that had handled radioactive waste and large portions of Detroit. This is how Jerusalem looks to the returning exiles from Babylon, abandoned, run down. But, rather than be overwhelmed by despair, Isaiah says, “I bring good news to the oppressed…. oil of gladness instead of mourning….I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God.”

The Apostle Paul writes to people in Thessalonica who are losing hope, growing discouraged, ready to give up. When Jesus said, I will be returning to be with you soon, they look at their calendars and figure soon is in their life time. Everything rides on the presence of Jesus. Jesus’ return means overturning the powers and principalities that are the source of so much suffering, with the Roman Empire being at the top of that list. From what the Thessalonians could see nothing has changed, worse yet members of their congregation are dying, some from persecution, some from natural causes, but death hangs in the air. Like Isaiah, like Chris Rock, Paul looks despair, discouragement and the promise of defeat in the eye and says, “Rejoice always.” “There is no bling on Jesus”.

To be sure there is plenty that can cause us to feel discouraged, hopeless, like nothing we do will make any difference. It may be some immediate problem, like having lost your mother’s ring while making Tamales. It could be the season of the year, with its emphasis on happy families, which can be especially painful if one’s own experience is just the opposite. It could be living in the midst of some personal struggle or facing a heart wrenching loss. It could be government policies or lack of government policies. It could be the Koch brothers, Rush Limbaugh or the editorial section of the St. Paul Paper that causes us to feel like giving up. There is plenty in our world and in our lives that make us feel like there is little we can actually claim as Good News.

But, Good News is precisely what Isaiah says we are called to proclaim. Without denying the struggles, without turning away from the loss, Isaiah and Paul invite us to be people who rejoice and with Chris Rock laugh at the principalities and powers, for those powers have no power over us.

Sometimes we as Christians are good at naming the problems. We are good at describing what is wrong with our world and in our lives. There have been plenty of sermons for example preached on the evils of materialism and the destructive potential of capitalism at Christmas time. I have probably preached a few myself. But, if we face these challenges without a sense of joy and rejoicing, we end up sounding like what most assuredly must be an oxymoron “Cranky Christians”. Prophets challenges the status quo, but they are never cranks, because their challenge to injustice is done with song, joy and I am guessing a measure of Chris Rock humor. Paul writes to people facing death and loss, but there is no room for despair or cranky Christians in the faith Paul proclaims, “Rejoice always,” says Paul. And in case, you are still tempted to preach a cranky sermon on the evils of materialism at Christmas, Paul says, “Do not quench the Spirit.” There are ways to face death, loss and injustice, without giving way to despair, cynicism and hopelessness. Rejoice always.

The questions is how do we rejoice when we do not feel like rejoicing, how do we laugh, when we do not feel like laughing? Our Adult Forum is presently engaged in a rich conversation about the book “Dare We Speak of Hope” by Allan Boseak. Boseak is a Black South African pastor and now professor who was active in resisting apartheid in South African. Boseak knows something about struggle and facing overwhelming odds.

In the book Boseak tells about Francis, a black servant woman, virtually a slave, who was brought to England from Africa in the 1600s. Lying on her death bed, with no evident reason to believe things will ever improve for her people, she nonetheless encourages fellow believers, “not to lose the glory of God in their families, neighborhoods or places where God casts them.” Boseak goes on to say that for Francis, “glory signified the transcendent present – not a passive waiting for a future in Heaven, but actions to be taken by the dispossesed, to create Heaven here on Earth.”

“Even today,” says Boseak, “this is what the shouts of ‘glory!’ in the black church mean when shouted in response to the realities of pain and struggle. We do not glorify suffering, but we rejoice in the fact that we might be part of the struggle…..’Nobody knows de trouble I’ve seen’ sang the African slaves. ‘Glory hallelujah! Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down; sometimes I’m almost to the ground: Oh Yes, Lord! Glory Hallelujah’.” Boseak asserts, “This is the glory we ‘share with God’, because it is the very God, says the sixteenth century theologian John Calvin, who has planted within us that longing for justice, peace and human fulfillment”.

There is neither in Paul or Isaiah any hint of what sometimes is referred to as positive thinking, which always is about individuals mustering up the individual capacity to rejoice, laugh and face hard times with a good spirit. For Isaiah and Paul rejoicing belongs within the community of faith. Individually we may be struggling, individually we may be grieving, individually we may at times feel hopeless, but when we gather as a community of faith we worship one who as the prophet Isaiah says, “binds up the broken hearted, proclaims liberty to the oppressed, release to the captives…offering oil of gladness instead of ashes and the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.” This is the prophetic mantle Jesus picks up and the mantle Jesus hands on to us. We give glory to the One who holds in safe keeping the promise and hope of forgiveness, justice, compassion, peace, love. There is no loss, no power, no economic system, no fear mongering that can rob us of the promise of God’s Reign in our lives and in our world.

Proclaim the good news says Isaiah. Rejoice always says Paul. There is no bling on Jesus.

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

*In the first two Sundays of Advent we heard from 1st Isaiah and then 2nd Isaiah. Today we hear from 3rd Isaiah who stands faithfully in the prophetic Isaiah tradition trusting the God of justice to be at work. Each of the Isaiah prophets speaks to a different context for the people. 3rd Isaiah speaks to people who have returned from Exile only to find a Jerusalem in ruins and animosity from those who stayed behind. 3rd Isaiah lays forth a vision of rebuilding a broken city and a broken community, one that will reflect the justice of God.*

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion — to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

**1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

*Paul’s letter to the people of Thessalonica is written to people who also struggle with discouragement and despair. Little has changed since the first birth of resurrection spirit broke lose among the early Christians. Initially they felt certain big changes would be happening immediately and they would see the Reign of God in all its fullness. Paul speaks to their discouragement with words of encouragement for the long haul. They are called to rejoice, not in their own accomplishments, but in what in God is doing.*

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.