

“DRINK UP!”
Isaiah 12:2-6; John 4:7-15
Sermon, 12/16/2018

Some years ago, Barbara and I were very involved in ministry at Gardner Correctional Center in Newtown, CT. Once a week, we would lead Bible Study, and a Worship service for a group of inmates, which gave us the bonus of sharing one on one with many of them, as they shared their individual and collective stories. No two were alike, yet most were the same. Everyone knew why they were incarcerated. What they had done, why it was illegal, and why they received the sentence they did, was understood. The differences in their stories were the details. Some had been sucked into crime through peer pressure, some out of economic desperation, some out greed or revenge, and some out of a sense of invulnerability, and a variety of other reasons. But they all were imprisoned.

What struck us was the number of repeat offenders. Why and how is another story. What also struck us was a growing realization that many of these “guys” had been prisoners all their lives. Without ever being arrested or tried, many had been imprisoned by a lifetime of being abused, or locked in poverty, in a vicious neighborhood, locked into drugs, and so much more. I know these sound like stereotypes, but these were real people. There were many inmates, especially those in lockdown or solitary confinement, we did not meet. I would suppose there are other stories, other reasons, other people, behind those same bars. But their stories still unsettle me.

Although what unsettles me more, even years later, is how quickly we can dehumanize one another. It took me a while (as I think it did Barbara, as well) at the weekly sense of being dehumanized, as we took part in the required ritual of being searched, removing neckties, belts, loose jewelry, emptying wallets and pockets, and other items, before being led by guards through solid steel doors, which slid open only when the guard pressed numbers into a code. Once those doors closed behind us, we were led through another set of similar doors, at which point, we would be led to the Cell Block. By then there was an eerie sense of being trapped, dehumanized.

So now I ask you, have you ever been in prison? Not literally, not behind bars, but have you ever felt trapped, ever felt unable to move of your own accord, either physically or otherwise? If you have, you know the feeling. It arrives in so many ways.

A career that has not led where you wished it would.
A relationship that has been tainted through the years, eating your heart out?
A death of a loved one who you cannot live without.
A dream that has given way to a reality you would not have chosen.
An inner peace that seems forever elusive?

Make your own list. Most likely you can identify places where peace and joy do not seem like options.

As we heard for the first two Sundays of Advent, the Israelites of Isaiah's time would have had a ready list of seemingly helpless imprisonments. The Northern Kingdom was annexed to Assyria and Judah lived under constant fear of its neighbor, wondering if it was next in line for occupation by a foreign nation. Israel had to feel trapped, had to wonder if there was even a chance for joy or peace, if there was any possibility for escape, any way to freedom.

Isaiah, fully aware of the situation, dares to see a way out, a road to freedom, a road of hope. He boldly announces this hope to a troubled, dehumanized people.

***Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid.
For the Lord is my strength and my might;
He has become my salvation.***

Hope, he says, is already in their midst. Peace is already present. Israel is being shown a path. The imprisonment of fear and inaction can be ended. Israel can find freedom, peace, and joy. All she has to do is join Isaiah in affirming: ***Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid.*** Her worldly concerns will not simply disappear, but Israel will know joy and peace when she places her trust in God, when she allows God to become her salvation. Her thirst for freedom will be satisfied. Her fear is her prison. It immobilizes her, keeps her from becoming all she can become.

***With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord,
call on his name;
Make known his deeds among the nations;
Proclaim that his name is exalted.***

Wow! Isaiah redefines the problem. It is not foreign powers that threaten, nor is it a lack of natural security, nor is it a lack of material resources. It is the fruitless search that is the threat. They will not find meaning and purpose for their lives on their own. Joy is not absent. It is simply not being recognized. The people are so busy worrying about it, that they don't see it. Isaiah's words come as a surprise to Israel, because they are not what they expect to hear.

***Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid...
With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.***

Isaiah is clear when he speaks to his people and to every one of us, who seek peace and joy and are fearful that it cannot be found. Salvation, freedom from any kind of prison, is found by trusting that the one who called us into being still calls to us, still seeks to open the solid steel doors in our lives.

Jesus is clear as well.

Recall the gospel reading this morning! A woman is imprisoned. Her life is a mess. She has been married five times and is now living with a sixth man. She comes to the well, thirsty and unsure of herself. She comes at noon because women will not be there at that hour. Women do not mix with men in public places. It will only be men, men who will not speak to her because custom forbids it. She comes sure no one will ask her any questions about her lifestyle. As in all good stories, there is a "but." A man does speak to her, and he asks her for a drink of her water. She must be wondering: What is happening? Who is this man who is breaking the rules? Who is this man that would speak not only to a woman, but a woman with my history? A conversation begins!

How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?

If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink, you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.

Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get this living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well...?

Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I give will become in them a spring of water gushing to eternal life.

Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.

Now, let me ask again: Have you ever been in prison?

Of course, you have. Of course, I have. And we will be again.

It is to you and to me and to anyone who will listen.

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

It is to us that Jesus speaks: ***The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.***

So, one more time, do you want to leave that prison?

On this third Sunday in Advent, and on every day to come, hear the gift of Christmas speaking: ***Come unto me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest...come to the living waters...drink from the cup of divine love...drink and discover joy and peace. Amen***