

“Be Not Afraid: Sing for Joy!”

Luke 1: 26-38; 46-55

I started out this week, planning a completely different sermon for today, planning a sermon that calls us to sing for joy, a sermon that calls us to see Mary’s song as words of praise. But late Monday morning, news reports changed all that. In our community of Woodford County, a senseless, horrible tragedy happened, a tragedy that has shaken all of us to our core. Things like the senseless stabbing of a six year old happen in other places, big cities far away from here, not in Woodford County. But on Monday, we learned that even here, senseless horrible acts of violence can and do happen here.

I have to tell you that I have procrastinated all week, trying to make time stop. I have been dreading this particular moment, this moment when I am supposed to stand before you and tell us once again, “Be Not Afraid” when I honestly didn’t know if I had it in me to say those words ever again.

I know I am not the only one feeling this way. Because this week, in response to the Theology Tuesday’s question which asked: “How will you sing “Do Not Be Afraid” to the world and be believed?” I got responses from members that let me know these words, “Be Not Afraid” just would not come to us this week.

In reviewing all the events of this past week, the events in our community, the events of our nation, the events of our world, events that seem to emphasize the brokenness and hurting of our world, these words “Be Not Afraid” seem too overly bright now as we struggle to figure out the why behind all the senseless, horrible tragedies filling our world. These words “Be Not Afraid” seem impossible to us now as we face a new reality that darkness is closer to our homes than we realized. It has been hard not to be afraid this past week and I know I am not the only one feeling this way. Because this week, in response to my Theology Tuesday, I received more questions than answers, questions that I too am struggling with myself as a person of faith.

I need to tell you that I had planned a completely different sermon today using the words of Mary’s song to remind us of God’s grace but as the week progressed, I realized Mary’s song was not helping me find God’s grace. Usually each Advent, I looked forward to the reading of Mary’s song because it sets before us the vision of God’s peaceable kingdom, the knowledge that the powerful will be brought down and the lowly lifted up, where the weak will be made strong and the strong made weak. Usually each Advent, I look forward to the reading of Mary’s song because it reminds me of God’s peaceable Kingdom. However this year, I could find no comfort in Mary’s song. I could find no hope in Mary’s song. And, although Mary’s song is a song of praise, I could find no joy in her words.

So I am grateful for a colleague who helped me find a new song, a song sung by the prophet Isaiah to the people of God, a song that puts fear in its place by redefining in the presence of God, a song that reminds us that even in the darkness, we can sing for joy because God, our Emmanuel, is with us, a song that tells us even when we can find no comfort or hope, we can always draw from the well of our salvation, God's love, and know that death and darkness do not have the last word.

I invite you to hear these words: A Reading from Isaiah 12: 2-6 and Psalm 56:4: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say on that day: Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel. This is the God, whose word we praise, in God we trust; we are not afraid.

As I read these words this past week, I could not help but think, how alike our world is to the one in which Isaiah wrote. Sure, years and distance separate our

stories but violence and brokenness are universal. These things continue to fill our world just like it filled it back then.

At the time in which Isaiah writes, for the people of God, it seemed like the darkness had extinguished the light. They were in exile, far away from home, still reeling from the physical, emotional and spiritual trauma they had experienced. They wondered if God had abandoned them. The secure world that they had built, the secure world in which they placed all their trust was shattered with no hopes of rebuilding. In the darkness, in the pain, the people of God were left with more questions than answers. It felt like they had nothing left. No hope. No comfort. No joy. Their spiritual well had run dry. There was no light, only the endless darkness that threatened to consume them.

Until a voice sang out. Like a candle burning bright against the endless darkness, it began quietly. It began as a hoarse whisper. It began as a small still voice. It lifted up a song of praise. It lifted up a song of joy. It lifted up a song to replenish their empty faith wells.

In this prophet's song, the past was remembered. In this prophet's song, God was celebrated for all the ways God had redeemed God's people. In this prophet's song, God's promises were shared and remembered. In this prophet's song, there was a reminder that beyond the tears, there is still joy.

Soon this voice was not alone. One by one, other voices joined in, adding their voice to this song of praise. Like candles burning bright, more and more were added until the darkness was no more.

“No longer was there a lone voice singing out against fear, as though whistling in the dark, but rather a chorus of voices offering praise for all that the Lord has done, making known all the things God has done, telling the whole world that God is not done yet, that God is still at work in this world, bringing healing and wholeness once more. No longer was there just one individual, but rather a community joined together in hope and in comfort. A community remembering that God has promised to change the world, a community remembering that God was with them now and forevermore. In that chorus of voices, heaven and earth came together and the universe was filled with singing, telling over and over again of the holiness of their God. In this prophet’s song, the people were able to draw from the well of their salvation, God’s love, and know that death and darkness do not have the last word.

This past week, I was asked how I find God’s peace in the midst of tragedy, how I can preach Good news to a community that is hurting. At first I wasn’t sure how to respond because I wasn’t sure I really had an answer. But then I

remembered...As trivial as it may sound, I remembered a song... “I simply remember my favorite things and then I don’t feel so bad”.

I know it sounds trivial but this is not just about the song...I also remembered the scene from the Sound of Music that comes before the song. The scene when all the children were frightened by the thunderstorm and they had all ran to Maria’s room. And then she invites them to come in and join her on the bed. The children run to the bed where they all snuggle together with blankets pulled up and then they look expectantly to her to ease their fears...and she begins to sing. She begins to sing of extraordinary ordinary things that fill her life, things that point to God’s grace, things that surrounded her every day, things that reminded her over and over again that love will always overcome the darkness.

And then I remembered this song in my own life...of the nights when as a family, growing up, we would gather on the couch, and watch the Sound of Music. We would cover ourselves in handmade quilts and have a huge bowl of popcorn. I remember my sister and I dancing and singing, pretending we were the VanTrappe family. I remember feeling in that moment safe and secure, like everything was right with the world. I remember how this one song brought comfort and hope to me in those moments gathered with my family.

Which led me to another memory, a memory of another time when song had done that for me and others as well, had brought us comfort and hope in the midst of darkness.

This moment happened at my daughter's funeral. I had asked Phil Burchell to sing as part of the service. I had asked him to sing "His Eye is on the Sparrow". I had heard him sing it many times at various church things. I'm not sure why I picked that particular song but all I knew was that at one of the most horrible moments in my life, I needed him to sing that song. I needed to find comfort and hope more than ever.

The day of the service arrived and Phil gets up to sing. He starts out but soon cannot continue. He is too overcome with tears. The piano keeps playing but no voice sings out...until somewhere, someone joins in, and then another, and then another until everyone is singing these words, "I sing because I'm happy. I sing because I'm free. His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me".

That one voice started out as a hoarse whisper but soon the community was joining in, and together, together, we were given strength. Together, we entered into a place where faith, courage and hope reside, together our voices sang out reminding us that beyond our tears, there was still joy. Because God, our Emmanuel, the one who came and dwelled among us, the one who came in love,

the one who wraps arms of comfort around us, because God, our Emmanuel was with us and had never left our side. We found comfort and hope in a song because we knew God had given us the promise that we can always draw from the well of our salvation, God's love, and know that death and darkness does not have the last word.

You see singing in the midst of the brokenness, singing in the midst of the hurt, singing in the midst of the darkness is what it means to be a disciple.

Because beyond our tears, there is still joy. And here is why I say that. As people of faith, as beloved children of God, named and claimed, we don't just sing any song. We sing a special song. We sing God's song of life. We sing God's song of love. We sing God's song of hope. We sing God's song of peace.

And in this song, we are reminded that our God, our Emmanuel, has never ever left our side, that our God surrounds each and every day with extraordinary ordinary things to show us God's love. We sing this song to remind us of God's presence in our lives,

It is in the singing of God's song of life, God's song of love that we bring our spirits back to life. It is in the singing of God's song of life, God's song of hope, that we enter into the work of the Kingdom of God. It is in the singing of

God's song of life, God's song of comfort, that we bring healing and wholeness to all of God's creation. But more importantly, it is the singing of God's song, God's song of life, God's song of joy, that we find the courage and the strength to once again say, "People of God, Be Not Afraid". Amen.