

Today's passage from Isaiah speaks of hope and joy. We need to keep in mind that this was God's word to people who had been defeated by Babylon. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The temple was totally destroyed. The nation Israel was basically defunct, with all who had power or wealth now in exile in Babylon. The times were marked by despair, hopelessness, and resignation to defeat.

Into this dark situation came God's promise through Isaiah. Your exiles will be set free. God is about to deliver you from Babylon. (pause) The people were given a hymn of joy, even though it was sung in the midst of defeat, death, and despair. The prophet envisioned the desert bursting forth into lush greenery, nature ushering in the new exodus offered by God. God would restore the people to the land of promise and make them whole. God would heal the earth, working creative power in the midst of dryness, weakness, blindness, lameness, and muteness. The future action of God was proclaimed on the basis of what God had already done for Israel.

As we approach Christmas, and once again hear the passage from Isaiah so full of promise and hope, we are invited to let it touch us. Even though it was written for a people in exile who had witnessed the destruction of their temple in Jerusalem and who waited for redemption while enduring very difficult circumstances, it also speaks to us. The passage says that God is going to bring about healing and wholeness to a broken and destitute people.

Today, on the second anniversary of the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary, healing and restoration are still desperately needed throughout our country and our world. Today, as it has become more and more evident that racism still has a lot of power among us, we need to hear a word of hope and wholeness. Today, as cyber-attacks undermine our sense of security and the released reports of our own nations use of torture has shaken our nation's self-image, we need the news that the God who made us and has brought us to this place in history is still leading us forward.

In the Gospel lesson from Luke (1:26-38), a young woman named Mary, who was totally different from Kate Middleton in that she had no special standing and was very poor, was visited by an angel who gave her a message that totally rocked her life. Thanks to God's work, she was pregnant even though she had not had sexual relations with anyone, including her fiancé. But the message didn't stop there; her baby, she was told, would be great and would be called the Son of God!

We Christians are too often pretty well dulled to this message, since we've heard it at least once every year. But for Mary, this was brand new, without a script. The promise was that God was with her, that she had found favor with God, and, that, by the way, NOTHING is impossible for God! Mary accepted all that the angel said, and declared herself to be God's handmaiden, God's servant. She accepted the incredible promise given her and stepped forward into a challenging and painful life as Jesus' mother.

We, who more than 2000 years later believe that God is still with us and that the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem is our Savior and Lord, live on both sides of these scripture promises today. God can turn a broken wilderness or a life that seems without hope into a place of blossoms and joy. It

happened for the Jewish people when they were finally returned home after years in exile; God did not forget them. It happened for old Elizabeth and her husband as they were unable to become parents for so long, but then, six months before Jesus was born, welcomed their own baby, John, into their family. It happened for all of us as Jesus allowed himself to be tortured and killed on a cross in order to break us free from the power of sin and death.

We may know that these promises ended up being good, and that God is with us, and that what God offered then continues to offer us LIFE today, but we forget them or get bogged down in our own "stuff," and too easily lose perspective as we experience our own kinds of despair and brokenness.

Yesterday while I was visiting with Jeanne Frink in Hartford Hospital a male nurse came in to attend to her. The man had an amazing personality that flooded the room with happiness and care. He bantered with us both as he did his job, and when I mentioned to him that he seemed to have a real ministry in his work, he told us that twenty years ago he was on the street in big trouble. He pointed to heaven and said, "He saved me and gave me a new life." The truth of this man's witness and the power of his care for others bring forth smiles and a sense of well-being and even joy right where sometimes there is little to smile about. The desert shall bloom. With God, nothing is impossible!

As Christians, we believe the fulfillment of these promises to be none other than the One this season is all about: Jesus Christ. We know what God has done for us, for we have seen it wrapped up in the manger and focused for us through the Cross. God has given us Emmanuel - God with us - through all of life and all of death and beyond.

The people exiled to Babylon were eventually freed, joyfully returning to Israel, expecting peace and joy in Jerusalem. Instead, they met great difficulties as they tried to restore the city and the Temple. Even though the promise of the return from exile had been met, the life they experienced was hardly utopia. They rejoiced in what God had done for them, but also hoped hard for what God would someday bring about.

So it is with us. We live on two sides of God's promises. We believe that in Jesus, God's kingdom on earth was established in a new, unmistakable way. But we also see how difficult it is to LIVE in this world as though there is such a kingdom, and so we have to hope that someday God will complete the restoration promised. So it's here, the kingdom, but it's also coming. It's like the 11 year old boy who was quite distraught as he went to see his pastor the week after his baptism. "Pastor, I thought that when I was baptized, I was supposed to become a different person, a new kid. I'm still the same kid I've always been." (pause) We believe that Jesus has brought in new life for us all, but we sure have trouble tasting or touching it - appropriating it - as we plod along.

Nothing's perfect yet. We're still the same folks we've always been. There is still more than enough sorrow to go around, and less than enough food for most of the folks of the world. We get bogged down in disagreements, and we find it hard to accept our neighbors, let alone love them. The lame rarely walk, the fearful tend to become more frightened... The world is harsh, scary, and seemingly traipsing right down the road to war and what seems like hell. So in order to have hope, we have to believe that God's got something else up God's sleeve, some further "play."

As we wait for Christmas, we hope for Emmanuel to be revealed in a new way, for the promises we believe were fulfilled in the birth of Jesus to become undeniable reality for our present. We look to the future with some of the same yearning the Old Testament folks did...Hoping for wholeness, peace, love, God.

We're still the same old folks... But wait a minute! Here's one of the most remarkable parts of the promise! You see, it is the same old folks, like us, that God loves. Recalcitrant, eager to bicker, quick to misunderstand each other and God... But the mystery of Christmas is its greatest promise: God loves us, and it was to folk like us - it is to us - that a Savior was given.

The desert shall bloom...A child is born... I repeat a familiar illustration: A woman lived alone in a mobile home in an area of Miami that many people considered dangerous. She was about to celebrate her 99th Christmas. A well-dressed man carrying a poinsettia arrived at her door on the afternoon before Christmas. With great caution she demanded to know who was there. She was surprised to discover that it was her doctor. With a smile that brushed away most of her wrinkles, she invited him in for a chat and a cup of coffee.

The next day her pastor visited her, and she shared her joy about the event. "Pastor, he didn't send the gift, he brought it himself!"

This is the truth of Christmas, this is the substance of God's promise of Immanuel. God delivers the gift in person, for every person, even for each of us. We live on both sides of this promise, seeing its truth and not seeing it, but by the grace of God, it is a promise given to us. It is God's promise, God's gift to us: Immanuel, God with us here, and now. Thanks be to God! Amen.