

Sunday, December 17, 2023 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church
Bible Study
Third Sunday of Advent
“Our Fierce Joy”
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants answer: “What can you remember about your baptism? Who was present? What did you wear? What does it mean to you?”
community?

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. Context. The book of Isaiah falls into two main sections. The first (chapters 1-39) records the oracles and prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose ministry spans the second half of the 8th century BCE (roughly 742-690). Starting with chapter 40 the text reflects the ministry of an anonymous servant who suffered and was killed in the closing days of the Exile in Babylon (around 539 BCE), including an "epilogue" of sorts in chapters 54-66 that describe the struggles of the suffering servant's followers as the people return to Jerusalem and begin to rebuild. This week's reading is at the center of this last section. The (anonymous) speaker, one of the disciples of the suffering servant, announces his own calling from God: to proclaim God's salvation to those who have been committed to the vision of the suffering servant and have suffered for it – the oppressed, the brokenhearted, etc. – as an example to all the nations of God's faithfulness.

John 1:6-8, 19-28. Context. This week's reading is John the Evangelist's account of John the Baptist. The account makes unequivocally clear that John's relationship to Jesus was strictly as a witness to him. The other gospels speak of John as “Elijah,” a figure who would usher in the messianic age; but here the Baptist denies such an identity. “The prophet” refers to another messianic figure, one promised by Moses in Deuteronomy, where Moses says that God will raise up another “prophet like me” to lead the people – an identity which the Baptist also denies. An important historical point: in John's Gospel, “the Jews” most often mean the religious authorities, not the entire people. This is so largely because when the gospel was finally written down around 95CE, Christians had been expelled from the Jewish community and no longer distinguished the leaders from the people. Moreover, the religious authorities of Jesus' day – Pharisees, Sadducees, etc. – had ceased to exist after the crushing defeat by the Romans in 70 CE. Neither did the priests and levites survive as authorities after the Temple had been destroyed. The names “cohen” (priest) and “levi” became family names, and continue to be used to this day, suggesting a link to that earlier time.

Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28.

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what questions do you have, or what doesn't make sense to you in the text?

Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28 again -

Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

- Divide the group into two smaller groups; have one half examine Isaiah 61:1-4, and the other verses 8-11. Look for all the images of restoration, renewal, and encouragement. Together, describe why the images work (then and now) and what portrait emerges for a community under God. Ask, "Where in this portrait do you see yourself?"
- Isaiah 61:1 speaks about the anointed one, and John 1:19-28 about one who, in effect, anoints. Can you think of any contemporary instances of this sort of action? Who, in the church or world, is an "anointed one" and who anoints? What import did that function (or functionary) have in the biblical contexts? What does it have today?
- The Old Testament passage was spoken to a broken, beleaguered people who were held in exile for many years in a foreign land. Given the state of the world, much of which is in some sort of chaos, can you imagine who or what could stand to deliver a message of restoration? Would it be believed? In what way can an individual address the chaos and offer a beacon of hope or encouragement in the midst of disarray?
- Describe the traits of John the Baptizer (John 1:6-8). John was called to witness to the "light," referring here to the Christ to come. *Witness* here has both a judicial and religious dimension, sufficient for evidence in a trial, which suggests the seriousness and weight of his claim. In what ways do you witness? Is it serious or compelling enough to be convicting "evidence"? How might you grow to be an even better witness?
- We are all called to live in the light. Who do you know who testifies to the light? Who are the faithful witnesses you have seen in action? How are you a witness to the light?
- John baptized with water in the tradition of the Jews' practice of ritual cleansing (see, for example, Leviticus 15 or Matthew 15:1-2). Advent, as a season of preparation, is a time for spiritual cleansing. What attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs might you need to amend to be ready to receive the Son? The Son receives us as we are, but what can you do to ensure that your spirit is in continual renewal?

Closing Reflection Question

How is this scripture calling you to change, to see, to be or what might it be calling you to do?

Prayer (10 minutes). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, end by praying the following or a similar prayer:

God of the prophets and Father of the Light: we struggle in the darkness to find the light and live in the light. We are grateful for the faithful witnesses who led the way with courage and encouragement. Inspire us to claim our baptismal vows and speak our word of truth in the world. In the name of Christ, the Anointed, **Amen.**

And now we pray The Lord's Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven
hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.