**St Andrew’s on The Terrace Sunday 16 December 2018 Advent 3**

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| **Readings for the Gathering**  **Hebrew Bible Isaiah 12:2-6**  **2**Surely God is my salvation;/I will trust and not be afraid./ The Holy One, God alone,/ is my strength and my defense;/  and has become my salvation.”/ **3**With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation./ **4**In that day you will say:/ “Give praise, proclaim the holy name;/     make known among the nations what God has done,/and proclaim that the name is exalted./ **5**Sing to God who has done glorious things;/ let this be known to all the world./ **6**Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,/  for great is the Holy One of Israel among you.” |
| **Gospel Luke 2:8-14**  **8**And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9**An angel appeared to them, and glory shone around them, and they were terrified. **10**But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11**Today in the town of David a Child has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the long awaited one. **12**This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”/ **13**Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, singing praise God and saying,/ **14**“Glory to God in the highest heaven,/ and on earth, peace to all.” |

**Contemporary reading from “The Invitation”**  by Oriah Mountain Dreamer

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shrivelled and closed from fear of further pain. I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it, or fade it, or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own; if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, remember the limitations of being human.

**The Reflection**

Like other this week I have been caught by the poignancy of a young British tourist being murdered on our shores. It has underlined our relative helpless ness and vulnerability as human beings. She was in touch with her family through social media multiple times a day – it must have been as if they were travelling with her. We in New Zealand would pride ourselves on having a so called safe country. She was intelligent, educated, even experienced in overseas travel. She was loved by her family which seems to be relatively affluent. She could afford to take a year to travel after completing a university degree. She apparently had everything going for her. And yet, like too many other young women, many of them less privileged than she, she was overcome by forces too evil for most of us to imagine.

We can be cynical that the outpouring of grief and shock was because Grace embodied her name – the big blue eyes and seemingly flawless skin on her social media photograph shows us a very physically attractive young woman and many other young women who have been killed in New Zealand do not have the same aura of romance around them as Grace did.

But whoever you are, whether you are murdered by a man or another woman, this is always a tragedy causing much sorrow to those who knew the victim.

It is a paradox in this advent week of joy that such sorrow flows through our nation. Yet, joy and sorrow are intimately and inextricably linked. It is because Grace is a beautiful and intelligent young woman who brought great joy to her family that her death brings them deep, deep sorrow. Our sorrow at any loss is a measure of how much joy that which we have lost has brought us. It applies to houses – leaving a home you have loved is a wrench. It applies to jobs – being made redundant or retiring from a beloved profession is a grief. It applies to relationships – we grieve for the friendships and lovers we lose in death or through estrangement. Even poor relationships still have had their good points, otherwise we would not have entered into them in the first place. It applies to religion – the loss of religious understandings that brought you joy when you were younger, now brings sorrow and grief and nostalgia. It applies to Christmas – the memory for many of a happy Christmas in your past may be a joy now covered over with pain.

The joy we are encouraged to feel by the two scriptural readings today are not just out of the blue joy. They are the result of something sorrowful and difficult having been resolved. In the Isaiah reading the reference is to deliverance from exile – the people were taken hundreds of miles to the east – to Mesopotamia for decades, but later released and allowed to return – this is the joy being expressed in that reading. God is being credited with that deliverance

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This is very different from the morning tones of the psalms where the people lament that they have to sing the Lord’s songs in a strange land. Now they have returned and joy also has returned to their lives. This joy is the other side of the coin of exile.

And in the Gospel, the announcement of the angels is not only a sudden burst of glory in the darkness of a middle eastern field. If you’ve ever looked at the timings of the books of the Bible there is a long space between the end of Malachi, the last book in the Hebrew Bible and the beginning of Matthew the first book in the Second Testament. During that time it is said, the prophets were silent. Israel did not seem to have anyone who could communicate for them with the gods. In the same away as when you are exiled it must have seemed a long, long wait for this Messiah that the people believed was promised them in their Hebrew Scriptures. There are not many times in an average life when we experienced an unbroken stretch of time when joy is always present. M. Scott Peck famously wrote at the beginning of his bestseller *The Road Less Travelled* - “Life is difficult”. My mother found that such a relief to read that she bought each of her four children a copy of his book. It seems that sorrow is more our experience, so that when joy burst in on us it is remarkable and we do remark upon it. It is as if is always needs to be announced by angelic beings, it is so special.

Not happiness but joy – joy that deeper emotion which carries with it still the echoes of pain, the scratches from the thorny bushes through which we have had to push, the blisters from the difficult road we have travelled, the difficulties of illness or poverty or despair, of treating elderly relatives frustrating in their loss of memory with dignity and respect, of managing small children who don’t understand the sacrifices you have made for them, of struggling through the entry level job which isn’t as interesting yet as you hope your career might turn out to be.

So when Oriah Mountain Dreamer writes of what is important to her about joy and sorrow in an authentic person, she begins writes first about sorrow:

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the centre of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shrivelled and closed from fear of further pain. I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it, or fade it, or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own; if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, remember the limitations of being human.

Be gentle with the sorrow and despair which you might be feeling at the moment or from time to time. It is part of you. As you experience it, it is honing you and carving you so that when joy comes you can hold more of it, revelling in the delight and glory of it all, like startled shepherds on a formerly dark hillside, or like people returned from exile in a far country, now coming home to yourself. Sit with the pain without moving to hide it or fix it and it will bring you joy.

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