

Reflection-12/17/2017- by Cathy Dempsey
Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24; John 1: 6-8, 19-28

“The Lord... has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted.”

“Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.”

“Make straight the way of the Lord.”

These three quotes, one from our first reading this morning from Isaiah, one from our second reading from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, and one from the Gospel of John, are all making the same point in different ways.

Really? Yes, Really.

“The Lord... has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted.”

“Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.”

“Make straight the way of the Lord.”

The message is this: Live in the present moment. Live in the present moment.

Your first thought, if you’ve been here the past couple of Sundays, might be: that’s the same thing Fr. Tom has been talking about for the first two Sundays of Advent—“Live in the present moment.” And of course, that’s true. I’m certainly not above borrowing material from other people if it seems to work.

Your other thought might be: How in the world are those three quotes all saying, “Live in the present moment”? I think it’s really true, though.

“The Lord... has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted.” How do we bring glad tidings to the poor, or heal the brokenhearted? In my everyday job, I work with mostly low-income folks, and I try to help them resolve their legal problems, which I like to think I do a pretty good job at most of the time. But I think probably the way I can most strongly “bring glad tidings to the poor” I meet every day is by being present to them—especially being present to their pain and trouble and suffering. When I can really be present and listen to their anger, their frustration, their fear, and be with them in the midst of that pain, that is when I am really bringing them glad tidings. That is what brings the most healing. Some days I do better than others at being present to them. And I think it’s that way for all of us, in our work and in our personal lives. If we can really be present in the moment with people’s joys and sorrows, that is bringing glad tidings. That heals the brokenhearted.

“Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing.” How can we possibly rejoice always? How can we possibly pray without ceasing? The more we can live in the present, the more we rejoice in every moment, the more we pray every moment. Now, first we have to get past this idea that joy and rejoicing are about feeling this “Woo Hoo! Everything is great and I just feel so happy happy all the time and everything is perfect” feeling all the time. That’s not real joy or real rejoicing. Those kinds of happy feelings are great, but they come and they go. Real joy and real rejoicing is

deeper than that. It comes with learning to accept and really feel whatever we're feeling in the present moment—whether it's grief, or pain, or anger, or if it is that “happy happy” feeling—and accepting that as a part of our life, and learning to see the gift in whatever those feelings are. There is a true peace and joy when we can accept whatever is in the present moment.

“Pray always.” Some of you know that I give workshops on centering prayer, sponsored by Contemplative Outreach. And the title of the first presentation in those workshops is “Prayer as Relationship With God.” I think most of us grew up with an idea of prayer as talking to God, which isn't a bad idea, and it is that, but it's more than that. Prayer really is our relationship with God. So even if I'm not specifically thinking thoughts about God, or talking about religion at any given time, if I am in relationship with God, and if that relationship is the basis for and informs what I say or do or just who I am and how I relate to others in the present moment, I am in prayer—every moment. And of course, there are some moments when I do better at that than others.

“Make straight the way of the Lord.” These are the words John's Gospel tells us that John the Baptist says. That's an interesting thing for a prophet to say: “Make straight the way of the Lord.” Does anybody here feel as if they're on a straight path, a straight highway through life? Personally, I feel as if I've had so many roadblocks, switchbacks, and detours on my road, I sometimes wonder if I'm getting anywhere at all. But then I think of that saying that “God draws straight with crooked lines.” Our idea of “straight” may not be God's idea. What we perceive

as “the long way round” or a detour might just provide the opportunity for growth, or strength that we really need. We don’t ever really know for sure “how far along” the road we are, and certainly not “How much longer ‘til we get there?” Our job is to just be where we are now, and then just take the next step.

That can be pretty uncomfortable for someone like me. I like to be able to plan ahead and predict that if I do A, B, and C, then that will get me to Point D in a certain amount of time. But that’s not how to “make straight the way of the Lord.” The way of the Lord is right here, right now—in the present moment. We make the way of the Lord straight in a kind of paradox—by being still, even if just for a few moments. Then we can really move forward, take the next step, trusting that God is present within us, guiding our steps.

God is truly the great “I am,” and the more we can recognize God’s presence in and around us, the deeper our relationship with God is.