

It was early last Monday morning when the text came from the east coast, telling me that my sister, Sherri, was in hospital fighting pneumonia and a viral infection. So far away, I felt isolated and alone, as concern and fear bubbled up in me. What could I do, I asked myself? Swiftly, I took out my phone and sent a text calling my closest friends and our Daughters of the King to join me in praying. And like a blanket of comfort and encouragement, they wrapped themselves around me and as St. Paul says in today's lesson, they began praying without ceasing. Although Sherri's recovery is going far too slowly to suit any of us, she is recovering, and for that I give thanks and rejoice.

Today, on this third Sunday of Advent, even as we extinguish the blue Bethlehem candle, we also light the pink candle and celebrate Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin word that means Rejoice.

And the invitation to rejoice is beckoning us. Rejoice is the refrain we sing as we call God to

draw near with the words, "O Come". It is how Mary's Spirit responds to God's in-breaking, as she is called to play a significant and particular part in God's plan to redeem humanity. And it is an act of expressing great joy or delight to which we are called, especially as we acknowledge and give thanks for Jesus: who was, and is, and is to come.

In Isaiah, Babylonia has fallen to Cyrus, and the people of Judah have been invited to return to their homeland, but are not yet settled. It is into the tension of this moment that the prophet claims emphatically his anointing by God's Spirit and his call to bear good news to these oppressed, to bind the brokenhearted, to give them hope, and a reason to rejoice.

With her Spirit ignited by God, Mary proclaims God's greatness and gratitude for the favor which God has bestowed upon her – a profound, incarnational movement of God. And, In our Gospel, we meet John who, anointed in the Spirit, testifies to the light, proclaiming the

coming of the one who will baptize not by water, but by Spirit.

Any of them could have resisted, yet none did. Regardless of how outrageous God's invitation, or how overwhelmed or frightened they may have felt, each responded in faith – and led the way forward for God's people, accepting and embracing their part in the bigger story of God's love for the world.

And This is the faith into which Paul calls us. John's gospel tells how Christ will send God's Spirit upon us; the great comforter and advocate, so that we likewise may be empowered and equipped to be bearers of hope and good news to the other. So that they may find reason to Rejoice.

Last week Rebecca reminded us of God, the comforter, and then, encouraged each of us to be bearers of comfort to others — so help to lift the burdens that weigh us down. Today we hear as Isaiah God's comfort is expanded to include

all who mourn, including you, and me. As they and we are comforted, the signs of mourning will become expressions of praise and celebration, and we will Rejoice. Into suffering and despair, Isaiah speaks this good, hopeful news for Judah. And this is the kind of good, hopeful news we, too, need today. I can't think of a better reason to rejoice than when our deepest longing or desire is fulfilled.

But the heaviness of the world threatens, and it is easy to become consumed by fear. We can imagine Mary being afraid as she hears from Gabriel about what God intends to work in and through her. Yet, when we hear the Magnificat, fear seems absent. All we hear is a response of unbridled joy and awe, and then echoing Isaiah's words, a testimony to God who loves of justice, and whose intention is to bring restoration, comfort and peace to humanity. God wants the weary world to rejoice, but God doesn't work alone. We have a part to play.

A few days ago, I popped into CVS, and as I was checking out, I casually spoke to the cashier, asking her, "So how are you doing? Are you feeling ready for the holidays?" She sighed, shook her head and said, "not really. I just got word that my brother has been diagnosed with cancer, and I'm really worried about him. Instantly I thought of my sister. I knew intimately how it felt to worry, as I waited for some good news. And so I stopped and said to her, "I'm so sorry; and I get you. My sister is in the hospital right now, and it's so hard to be at a distance. It feels like there is nothing we can do."

She nodded and said with tears welling up, "Yes, exactly. I feel so helpless, and I don't know what to do." As we finished our transaction, I said, "You take care, now. Don't lose hope." She smiled, and said, "God bless", and then added a sincere, "and thank you so much."

Now, I didn't have my collar on, but I knew in that moment that God had broken in. Because

with the incarnation, God's relationship to humanity and humanity's relationship to God was changed. The incarnation means that we human beings can now see, hear, and know God in ways never before possible. Sure, it's unlikely that an angel of God would appear before us bearing God's outrageous plans for our lives, or that we would encounter right here in Carmel a messenger like John, an insistent voice calling us out of the haze of our everyday wilderness to take notice of God, and all the reasons we have to rejoice. But friends, God breaks in! In moments when we are comforted and encouraged by others, and in moments when we are called to be the ones who bring that comfort and hope. We have so much for which to be thankful, even as we face complexity and challenges in our lives and in the world.

Theologian Frederick Buechner said, "The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work that you most need to do, and that the world most needs to have done. It is the place

where our deep gladness and the world's hunger meet."

So where and how might God be calling you to bear the hope, promise and good news found in Jesus? Where does your deep joy intersect with the world's hunger? Right here at St. Dunstan's, we such an intersection as we generously gift funds to provide feed children in Haiti; as we gift groceries and necessities to those who produce the food we eat and take for granted; as we honor and restore dignity to those whose "home" 4 times a month is our parish hall; as we lift the spirits of those who long to provide their children with Christmas gifts, but who lack the resources to do so.

Perhaps you, like me, have had an unexpected encounter with someone in which, upon reflection, you are able to see God's Spirit at work. Maybe someone has tended to your soul, restored your hope, and given you cause to rejoice? It is when we seek to engage and bear hope into the lives of others that we discover

the fullness of our own humanity and the depth
of our purpose.

The Spirit of the Lord gives light and strength to
those who lean into hope, even while
acknowledging the world's (and our) pain. So go
forth, rejoicing in the power of the Spirit, and be
bearers of Christ's good news!