

Our Salvation

Isaiah 12:2–6

² Surely God is my salvation;

I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

³ With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. ⁴ And you will say in that day:

Give thanks to the LORD,
call on his name;
make known his deeds among the nations;
proclaim that his name is exalted.

⁵ Sing praises to the LORD, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.

⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Commentator Roger J. Gench tells this story: As a child, he used to have endless fun playing Monopoly—the board game in which one aims to amass wealth by buying property and extracting rent from fellow players who, because of an unfortunate roll of the dice, land on the squares that you own. His dad used to give him and his brother twice the amount of money the rules allowed. He presumed the assumption was that his dad was smarter than they were, but this meant that if he or his brother landed on a prized square like Park Place or Boardwalk, they had more money to buy up the property, to buy a hotel or two, and to charge exorbitant fees from the other less fortunate players. From this game he learned two contradictory realities about life that are always held in tension and that continue to puzzle him to this day. The first is that life is lived on a competitive, but unequal, playing field in which winning and losing is based

somewhat on merit but also significantly on the social benefits of being born of a certain class, race, gender, and with a certain amount of intelligence, and physical prowess. The second lesson learned is that God is somewhat like his dad, an uncommonly generous giver of very good gifts, the benefits of which we often exploit and misunderstand. While he grew up wishing he had been born into privilege, in his church he was taught that he was good enough, and that God loved him even when he squandered the gifts he had been given. He also learned in church that the world of grace and salvation is always in tension with the world of merit and privilege.

The clash between these two worlds is reflected in our scripture lesson from Isaiah. Isaiah 12 looks forward to the day when God's anger over the people's turning away from the Torah is turned into a word of comfort. Walter Brueggemann points out that the use of "comfort" in our scripture looks forward to the use of this same word in Isaiah 40, which announces the homecoming of the people of God who are in exile. There our scripture anticipates a day when Jerusalem will be destroyed and the people taken into exile; but it also anticipates homecoming. Homecoming must certainly be included among the many "deeds" of God referred to in the text.

Salvation as homecoming is noteworthy because it is a gift. In Isaiah's view, the people have done nothing to deserve the gift. In other words, the gift is not based on merit. Moreover, the people certainly did not deserve the gift on account of the privilege of being in covenant relation to God, because they had abused the privilege. The nature of this gift is highlighted by the use of an image of water being drawn from a well of salvation. In his commentary on Isaiah, John Calvin said this of the image: "Everything necessary for supporting life flows to us from the undeserved goodness of God.... [Isaiah] appropriately compares the mercy of God to a fountain, which satisfies those who are thirsty and dry."

Yet Roger Gench admits that he finds the language of gift incommensurate with the Monopoly model of the world in which we live—a world where merit will get you only so far and where privilege is often abused. In this world, the language of gift carries the connotation of either exploitation or something we don't deserve. He has a friend who calls terms like grace, gift, and salvation the “language of Zion,” by which he means the strange language of the church that is in tension with the language of the world.

In her book *Economy of Grace* Kathryn Tanner reframes the traditional language of the church using the modern economic language of competition. In the world of games and economics, competition is based on a win-lose model; for someone to win, someone has to lose. When playing a game, winning and losing can be fun. But in economics, where possessions and the privileges are often exploited, winning and losing can be devastating. By marked contrast, in the noncompetitive economy of grace, the goods that are given by God are given in an indiscriminate and recklessly extravagant manner, and seemingly without God's suffering loss. Also, in the economy of grace, even when we fail to give in return, God keeps giving (just as every time Roger played Monopoly, his dad would keep giving them more money than the game allowed, even though they exploited the privilege). **Roger J. Gench**

Isaiah 12, a prophetic song, bursts with joy and promises God's presence and salvation. This joyful and triumphant song with its messianic implications exuberantly fits well the traditional theme of joy for the Third Sunday of Advent.

Isaiah's song exudes confidence. Our salvation is God's gift; this knowledge is a solid foundation for confidence. It banishes distress and uneasiness. As Christians we are cheerful because we are reconciled to God and have strength because God is our strength. God is our song. God's kindness upon us encourages perseverance in thankfulness.

Joy springs from God's favor (v. 3). As joy progresses, it becomes the sacrifice of praise (see Hos. 14:2; Ps. 50:23; Heb. 13:15). Our confidence comes from the assurance that eventually God—and therefore the godly individual and godly community in tandem—will be victorious. The God who faithfully began the salvific process carries it through to completion for us as individuals and for us as a community. Our salvation and God's other graces form a constant running fountain from which we draw. The springs or wells of salvation produce life-giving water. Deep, constant, pure water—essential for life. God's grace is not a onetime thing; the broad concept of salvation/ deliverance occurs repeatedly throughout our lives and our community's life. God's salvation is as faithful as a deep, underground spring. Joel 3:18 speaks of a fountain flowing from the Lord's house. God's undeserved goodness never ceases. It calms, refreshes, cleanses, restores, provides life, covers, and satisfies. It does all this thoroughly and abundantly. Later, Isaiah encourages all who are thirsty—whether believers or not—to come and drink; no money is necessary (55:1).

Then the prophet commands us to make known God's deeds among our neighbors and the nations. God's salvation made known to the Israelites and to us is too glorious to be kept solely in that community. Infectious joy needs to spread throughout the whole earth.

What began with an individual's excitement about our salvation now becomes a community's excitement. What started as an individual's charge to praise now expands to a community's responsibility to give thanks, make known God's deeds, and exalt God's name among the nations.

Joy about God and our salvation escalates in volume. Sing, believing community! God has done glorious things! Singing accelerates to shouting, even the high-pitched shouting. Evidently God not only likes but also commands noisy worship! The desire of a godly community is that God's goodness become known

to all humankind so that all may call upon God and all may join in a cacophony of singing, shouting, praising, thanking, and worshiping God. God's people face a fun and fulfilling future exalting God's great name. What started as an individual's joy eventually will be experienced by everybody. A song of praise, shout of thanksgiving, exclamation of joy—responds to God's goodness glimpsed in the present and assured of for the future. **Robin Gallaher Branch**

God's king will reign. Indeed, God gave of Godself in Christ. Even though we use the language of suffering for the crucifixion of Christ, the resurrection is a witness to the fact that for God, to give is to gain, because the Christ event empowers us to see the win-win world of the gift-giving God who frees us from the win-lose world based in merit that never satisfies, or in privilege that is always abused. Isaiah looks forward to this win-win world of the gift-giving God in its idyllic vision of the future, when “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6).

Perhaps the language of Zion—the language of grace, gift, and salvation—is not so strange after all. For what is so strange about a world of winners? Where the environment is not exploited in order to make a profit? Where people don't work for their poverty? And where the phrase “homeless person” is an oxymoron? Let us draw deeply from such “wells of salvation” and look forward to the day when salvation and homecoming will be a reality for all of God's people. **Roger J. Gench**

So, we too on this Third Sunday of Advent are called to sing for joy, to celebrate the ways in which God has given us salvation, delivered us, is delivering us, and will deliver us, until there is true peace, shalom, wholeness on earth and goodwill throughout the entire creation. “With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.... Shout aloud and sing for joy.” **Randle R. Mixon**