

“Raising Up”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 17, 2023

Third Sunday in Advent

Psalm 126

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

“They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations.” (v. 4a)

During this Advent season, we have been reading from the Old Testament prophets; and specifically, from Isaiah. Here, the prophet’s audience seems to be the exiles who have recently returned to Jerusalem. A promise of newness comes to them as they look around their beloved city and see no signs of a rebuilt temple and strained relationships with those who were not taken in the exile but continued to make their lives in Jerusalem. The promise of comfort, restoration, and freedom seemed far off – yet it was spoken. God had been at work in their midst; God could now be at work through them.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me...” (v. 1) the prophet says. The language recalls the first chapter of Genesis in which the spirit – or breath – of God hovered over the waters at creation and spoke the world into being. These verses in Isaiah amount to nothing less than a creation narrative; out of the chaos and destruction of exile, the Lord will create something new.¹

The speaker of the prophecy has been anointed for a mission of radical proclamation. The commission is to bring good news to the poor, release to the prisoners, and comfort to those who are mourning. In order to reach those persons in need, God’s anointed must step forward and confront the sources and perpetrators of oppression, marginalization, hopelessness, and despair.

Recall that the context for this passage is the shaken hope of these earliest returnees from exile. All is not as they had imagined and hoped it would be. The reality of what they saw in Jerusalem did not match what they expected to see. The

¹ Kristen J. Wendland from *WorkingPreacher.com*

city's former glory did not manifest in the economic disparities, the religious and cultural factions they now witnessed.

Yet, they were not powerless to affect change. Those who have been mourning will be called “oaks of righteousness” and “the planting of the Lord.” These organic metaphors display God’s power to elevate the lowly; God will raise up those who are bowed down and strengthen those who are weak. Their deep roots will give them staying power. Their elevated status will owe not to exploitation that keeps others down but to a quality of righteousness that lifts others up with them.

Thus, rather than hearing these words as praise for a deity who serves my needs, we maybe should hear them, instead, as a divine command to go out and bring healing to a broken world; or, to put it in proper Advent language, we are called to be Christ to others. As an Advent text, Isaiah 61 is not just about the ability and desire of God to heal human wounds. It is, also, a call laid upon us to be the bodies through whom divine justice becomes reality; the hands and feet of God that help bring good news to the oppressed, proclaim liberty to those imprisoned, and turn mourning into joy.

The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday – taken from the Latin word for “rejoice” – as in today’s Psalm reading, “May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.” (126:5-6)

As former Harvard Divinity School chaplain Peter Gomes points out, Presbyterians are not often thought of as joyful people; “decent and orderly, yes, but not given to spontaneous expressions of joy.” And yet, our denomination’s foundational documents – the Westminster Confession and Catechism – says that the first duty of humankind is *to love God and enjoy him forever*. “There we have it,” Gomes says, “joy as a command, joy as a duty. No wonder,” he concludes, “joy is so elusive.”²

Joy is elusive, Dr. Gomes goes on to explain, because we often confuse it with pleasure or happiness; things that we can manufacture and control ourselves. No, when, at Christmas, we sing, *Joy to the world, the Lord is come*, we are proclaiming God’s coming to fulfill the promises of restoration – making things whole and new. “The context of joy,” according to Gomes, “is not delight, but

² Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, p. 233-4

deprivation. The experience of joy reminds us by what we have gained what we did not have before we gained it.”³

Consider, for example, the story and situation of Mary. To the appearance and salutation of the angel Gabriel, she was perplexed, wondering what this encounter might be. To the news that she is to bear a son, Mary – maybe young but certainly no fool – asks, “how can this be?” (Luke 1:34) With her, we might pause and ponder her wariness, her caution, indeed her reluctance to being chosen to give birth as an unwed virgin. It is only after she visits her cousin Elizabeth that Mary catches up to the joy that lies before her; as her song, the Magnificat, begins, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God.” (Luke 1:46)

It is fair to wonder whether the audience of Isaiah’s prophecy has been looking too closely at the ruin of their city and the “devastations of many generations” (61:4) rather than to what they have gained by God’s leading them home from exile. Their situation may not be perfect – certainly not on par with what they had expected to find upon return – but, at least, the possibility of restoration now exists where it did not before. God was with them; the Lord saw the pain of the oppressed, the imprisoned, and the aggrieved and was now summoning the people to join in the divine process of healing and redemption.

Who is this God who partners with them in the rebuilding of their world? In verse 8, the voice of God says, “I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully give to them their recompense and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.” This creator God is also a lover of justice; one who wants to provide fair compensation to those who treat others well. As a Christian people, we might well read this language of an everlasting covenant to mean that with Jesus’ birth, all people are invited to be a part of this restoration project: planting and building, freeing and empowering; turning devastation into delight.

These conditions that Isaiah addresses are not foreign to us. We face modern-day crises in areas of homelessness and housing affordability, a proliferation of hateful speech against both Jews and Muslim-Americans, and wide disparities in opportunity, wealth and health outcomes. Our churches express widely different messages about God’s identity and who is welcome. Our government is divided over how and whether to support victims of violence and aggression overseas. And the people of this congregation have been reminded – over this past week – of our susceptibility to COVID and its unpredictability.

³ Gomes, p. 242-3

With the birth of Jesus, God chose to enter a world not unlike that of Isaiah and the newly returned exiles, nor dissimilar from the fractured and divided place that we find ourselves today. On that first Christmas, Christ was born into a context that resembled deprivation far more than delight.

And yet, even in those humble and unexpected beginnings, we are given signs of great joy that was being born. After appearing to Mary and Joseph to share the good news of this birth, angels descend on shepherds in the fields, calling them into rejoicing for the Savior that has been born. They then come to pay homage to the one who will become the Good Shepherd; the one who will one day return to his hometown and announce the good news of God's love, picking up the scroll of Isaiah and reading the same words we heard this morning, announcing to them, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news..." (Luke 4:18a)

On this Gaudete Sunday, this third Sunday in the Advent season of anticipation of and preparation for the birth of Jesus, let us not confuse pleasure-seeking or the pursuit of happiness with joy. For rejoicing in the Lord – loving and enjoying God – might at times seem elusive, but it is our highest calling; to be partners with the God of creation, justice, and redemption. From the deprivations of poverty, captivity, and mourning will spring forth the delights of healing, freedom, and abundance.

Each of us has our own ancient ruins and former devastations; we all have experienced our share of loss, disappointment, and failed expectations. But, even in the midst of devastation, the prophet Isaiah could proclaim that joy would come again to God's people; that the Lord who created them would also clothe them in glory and bring forth justice. "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;" the prophet proclaims, "For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robes of righteousness." (v. 10)

God, in Christ, comes down to be among us so that we, God's covenant people, might be raised up with him. Thanks be to God. Amen.