

**Sermon for Third Sunday of Advent, December 11, 2011**

**"Hope Restored"**

**Text: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11, Psalm 126**

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Let us pray:

Merciful God of peace, your word, spoken by the prophets, restores your people's life and hope. As we hear your word read and proclaimed today, tilt our ears to listen close, fill our minds with new understandings, and load up our hearts with the joy of your saving grace, that we may hold fast to your great goodness in our lives and proclaim your justice in all the world. Amen.

Over these weeks of Advent our readings have all come from the Book of Isaiah in the Hebrew Bible. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah warn of God's impending judgment on an unfaithful Israel. Chapters 40-55 find a Second Isaiah speaking words to comfort God's people during their captivity in Babylon. The book's closing eleven chapters which are attributed to a yet unknown Third Isaiah address the dire situation of the exiles find themselves in after they've returned to their devastated homeland after seventy years in captivity in Babylon. The reality of

rebuilding their lives in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction was no doubt overwhelming. And despite its "shouts of joy," our psalm for today, Psalm 126, is really a lament, a cry for help in the midst of those terrible circumstances. So the psalmist remembers what God has done for Israel in the past, and what that felt like. He remembers the ancient promises God made to Abraham and Sarah of many descendants and a land of their own. He remembers the exodus from slavery in Egypt. And now he remembers the homecoming to Jerusalem and their return from exile in Babylon. But now it is years later and the first rush of enthusiasm is over, and the people are struggling. The Temple has been rebuilt but it is no where near as magnificent as the one built by King Solomon. And return, as anybody knows, is hardly the same thing as restoration. Ask anyone who has ever tried to heal a broken relationship. Ask the people of New Orleans or Joplin, Missouri who have tried to rebuild a community after a natural disaster.

On this Third Sunday in Advent, perhaps we share to some extent the challenges faced by Third Isaiah and his people. It's true the people of Israel had suffered much longer than many of us. And it's equally true that there are countless others whose suffering has gone on much too long. All around us in this world today there are systems and practices and attitudes that keep people down, if not captive, trapped in poverty, hunger, disease, and war. This Advent, the pain spreads as one nation after another faces cascading economic problems, not the least of them unemployment or the threat of unemployment, foreclosure, and crushing debt.

In Isaiah's time you were more likely to be imprisoned for debts than for hard crime. No wonder then that folks needed to hear that someone had come to "proclaim release to the captives"! In our society, too, many folks feel trapped by debt, by "upside-down" mortgages and huge credit card balances, and they would love to be set free. Certainly some of that debt is from our own spending on things we didn't really need, but

there are plenty of us who have burdensome debt from our education, from health expenses, from the costs of raising children, from our need for food and housing. Many of us, then, can hear talk this of jubilee, or a reversal of fortune, the cancellation of debt, as good news. But the good news from a still-speaking God extends beyond our own lives to the life of the world. Ancient Jerusalem after the exile was damaged and in ruins, much in need of being rebuilt. It is a powerful symbol of our own cities and towns today, and of the world beyond our borders, where nations are imprisoned by enormous debt that needs to be forgiven.

If anything, the global economy has brought home just how much we are connected to and dependent on one another, even if most of our politicians espouse a message to the contrary. There are signs of wear and tear everywhere: the health system that takes care of our bodies is strained, and the roads and bridges we travel on are cracking under the load of the cars we can't afford to drive. There's a lot of work to be done, there are many needs to be met, and one

piece of the good news is that there are workers to do the work. I believe that the ruins of our cities could be restored, if we truly experienced ourselves as a community and not as individuals looking out for ourselves and our own. That would be good news and a source of joy, would it not? That would be something to remember, and to sing about!

When we read this text from Isaiah I am Aware of our shared crisis, but it also makes us sensitive to the personal sorrow of many around us. The message the world sends to us tells us to be joyful as we shop and clean and fill up our calendars. But we know that all around us are also those who carry heavy burdens of grief, depression, loss, illness, and financial worries. The holidays can make these problems even more difficult. Homecomings, whether they are to church or to family households, can be filled with expectations and met with disappointment. This Advent, I think of my own daughter, who is on a downward spiral which none of us who love her seem able to stop, and of my son-in-law who struggles as a low income wage earner to take care of his children.

I think of my senior friend whose son died unexpectedly, of my friend whose mother battles pancreatic cancer, and of my friend who just had a double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. How will they face the merriment of Christmas this year?

Now you may be wondering, where's the joy? This is the third week for this kind of Advent message. "Where is the joy?" you ask. The joy for me is in the promise of today's psalm: "Those who go forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy" (v.6). Yes, we all seek joy in this season, but perhaps many of us are looking for it in all the wrong places and in all the wrong ways. Advent joy is not jingle-bell joy brought on with the swipe of a credit card. Advent joy is not to be found in the frantic pushing and shoving of a department store cash register line. Advent joy is most certainly not found in the fatigue and boredom on the faces of those scurrying down the shopping mall. The seeds of an Advent joy have been planted in sadness and watered with tears. This is the honest joy that often comes only

after weeping has tarried for the night. This is the surprise of joy which C. S Lewis wrote about in his book of the same name. Our joy is in the confidence that God keeps God's promises. True joy is the promise that God is at work in every human endeavor that strives for peace and wholeness, even if that peace is partial, even if that wholeness is now only seen dimly as in a smoky mirror. True joy is leaning toward that day when all things will be whole, made new, not just restored. It's the long arc Martin Luther King, Jr. preached about. And this promise isn't for just one nation or one people but for all of God's children. God's healing and compassion encompasses all those who suffer. The rebuilding God intends will make our social systems as just as our bridges will be made sturdy.

When Jesus, the One whose birth we commemorate this season, was launching his public ministry, he went to his hometown Nazareth synagogue and took out the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and read these elegant and hope-filled words of promise which we read this morning. Jesus' ministry of healing and freeing and preaching

is the definitive sign of God's coming into the world in a new way, an incarnational way. In Jesus, God's new age has dawned. And this spirit continues, within the church, and within each of us, in every act of justice and rebuilding, in every outreach of healing and hope.

I am glad that over these weeks of Advent we have been hearing the ancient plaintive carol, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel," in many forms and styles. The words of that song remind me that Advent is a journey from whatever despair has seized our human spirits to a lively hope in the Second Coming of Christ, to a living affirmation of the mystery of our faith which we proclaim at the Table: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!

Understandably, we often try to shut ourselves off from the world and its misery in some illusion of comfort, thinking that the world's misery cannot touch us, as if somehow we are just observers of the hurts of our neighbors around the globe or around the corner. It's no wonder then that we rush from Advent's purples and deep blues to

the reds and greens and golds of Christmas. But the truth is we cannot escape or isolate ourselves enough. We are part of the human family and whatever that family experiences we experience. So it is good that we sing and pray, "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." Come, Emmanuel, and take us by the hand and lead us on this journey from despair to hope, from weeping to rejoicing, from tears to joy. Come, Emmanuel, and tell us that we are not abandoned, that God is with us. Come, Emmanuel, and tell us that God has a better plan for us and for this world. I recall too the words of an old Appalachian Christmas carol:

I wonder as I wander, out under  
the sky,

How Jesus the Savior did come  
for to die

For poor ordinary people like you  
and like I;

I wonder as I wander, out under  
the sky.

The good news is that God has always envisioned the restoration of ruined people and places, of ruined people just like us, of ruined places like our place, and that God empowers ordinary people just like us to do the work of rebuilding what is broken.

Oh, I know that everywhere else out there the message is anything but this. Yet all I know is that Advent was never meant to be a month long fa-la-la-la-la. As Kenneth Samuel wrote yesterday in his Stillspeaking Daily Devotion, "The advent of Jesus is not just about his manger; it is also about his mission. A mission that would render him smitten, smitten of God and rejected by men and women." Where is the joy in that you ask? It is a deep and profound joy, what Isaiah understood: suffering for the cause of God's realm is redemptive in every sphere of life. Advent is a time to remember just how much the whole world needs Christ.

Advent, you see, means "coming toward" and the "coming toward" that the season of Advent addresses is not so much Christ's birth in Bethlehem, but God's final "coming toward" us in the return of Jesus Christ, "our judge and our hope," to quote the contemporary creed. Advent is about the end of the present and ruined world order, and the ushering in of what the Bible calls "the new creation."

So...

Come, O come, Emmanuel, and  
ransom, and order, and open wide,  
and free us. Come and disperse the  
gloomy clouds of night and put  
death's dark shadows to flight.  
Come, and bind us all in one heart  
and mind.  
Come, O Come, Emmanuel and  
restore our hope. Amen.