

Advent 3—Year B
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
John 1:6-8, 19-28

It is **heavy**. The **numbers keep climbing** with the sense that it will get worse before it gets better. While we may have dodged earlier surges, not so this time around. The **stress on our local healthcare system** is real; we hear it every week in our prayer time—more and more of us know people impacted directly by this virus. **Nationally**, we are now encountering a **9/11 death toll every day due to COVID**, and on **Friday**, the **Director of the CDC** said that we can expect *that death toll every day for the next two to three months; more people have died than the number of U.S. soldiers killed in combat in WWII.*

And, as one commentator said this week, it's a **split screen**—and on the other half of the screen is the **news that vaccinations are beginning**. There is **light at the end of this tunnel**, but we still have a **long way to go to get through this tunnel**.

And, **the church gives us this season of Advent**, all the more poignant this year. A season designed for **apocalyptic times**; a season designed to **cultivate the practice of waiting**; a season to **hold onto hope, even in the midst of profound darkness**.

It is so helpful to reach back into our **collective memory** and draw upon **the story of our ancestors in the faith**. The times that prompted the **writing of Isaiah 61** remind us that **the people of God have often lived through tumultuous times, hard times, devastating times**. They had the experienced the **trauma of exile**, of **losing everything familiar** to them and **having to learn to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land**.

We know something about that this year. All of **familiar rhythms and routines have been upended**, and now as we head into **this holiday season**, **all of our traditions will be reworked**. *We are having to learn to sing the Lord's song in this strange land*.

But then, the **people of God got to leave Babylon and return to their beloved Jerusalem**, and lo and behold, *even as they went home, there was no going home*. **Things were hard**; there were **obstacles to overcome**; the **rebuilding of the Temple didn't go according to plan**; **people had developed different patterns of relationship, and community, and worship during that time of exile**—there was a **lot to sort through about what the new normal would look like**. At the particular point that the **prophet writes**, **it was dark and hard**, and **it was insanely courageous to hope**, but **God wanted people to catch a vision of a future more whole than the past and present they were living through**.

In the midst of this dark and deadly season, **Isaiah understands that the spirit of the Lord GOD is upon him** and that *he* has been anointed by God to bring good news to all those who are oppressed, in the **Hebrew, the poor, and humble, and weak, and needy, and afflicted**.

Can we see ourselves bringing such good news to those in such need in this time, to those who are afflicted by this virus and impacted by all the ripple effects of the pandemic?

Isaiah understands that *he* is to bind up the brokenhearted.

This has been a shattering experience for so many, can we see ourselves helping others collect up the shattered pieces of their lives and spirits and hearts, and, in the power of the spirit, helping to bind up those wounds and make whole those hearts?

Isaiah knows that *he* is to proclaim liberty to the captives, but this liberty isn't the kind that Merriam-Webster defines as "the power to do as one pleases; the freedom from physical restraint; the enjoyment of various rights and privileges" that is so rampant in our time—in the Hebrew, this liberty is about *flowing*. That echoes back to Richard Rohr's Trinitarian teaching about *flow* and how *sin* is *whatever stops the flow*.

For all those who are held captive in so many different ways, how do we help them enter back into the flow of love that is at the heart of creation and life in God?

Isaiah feels bound to proclaim release to the prisoners, and again, the Hebrew is so rich—this release is to open the eyes wide of those that feel bound.

We get all bound up by so many things—resentments and anxieties and fear and anger and shame and guilt and despair and cynicism—can we help one another to open our eyes wide to see God's mercy and grace and compassion and never-ending love and care?

With all the broken pieces of the world lying around us, can we dare, with Isaiah, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, even now?

Can we feel, as Isaiah does, that the spirit of the Lord GOD is upon US and that this spirit will fill our tanks and equip us to comfort all who mourn? Amidst so much death and disruption and despair, has the ministry of simply providing comfort ever been more important? For those longing for normal, who are coming to terms with the fact that normal won't return in the same fashion that it left—after all, we never emerge from a death experience and find the world as it was—for those who are mourning that loss, can we, in the words of the Hebrew, give them beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, the mantle, a wrap, of praise for the spirit of heaviness?

Oh my, Isaiah is speaking to our hearts now. This is no pie-in-the-sky-polyannaish-not-in-touch-with-reality spin; this is "eyes wide open I know y'all are hurting and your spirits are heavy but beauty and joy and praise are still your inheritance *even now*." *Even now*, God knows *we are strong trees*—terebinth trees in the Hebrew, oaks in the English translation—*we are strong and steady and sure, aligned with God and God's ways, the planting of the LORD, to display God's glory*.

Can you feel this in the depths of your souls; can you feel this in your weary spirits? Whether you can or not doesn't actually matter because it's TRUE nonetheless.

And yes, there is **so much work to be done**. Isaiah knows **this**, and *so do we*. God is equipping us for the work ahead—the building up of ancient ruins, the raising up of former devastations, the repair of ruined cities that have been devastated over generations.

Isaiah could be speaking in 2020. This year has shown us all that needs building up and raising up and repairing.

And God has clothed us richly so that we can DO this work—God has put on us the garments of salvation, wrapped us in layer upon layer of wholeness and healing, given us a robe of righteousness, the capacity to walk in the ways of God. Jesus donned this robe and has shown us how to wear it and live it in the flesh-and-blood, rough-and-tumble of our lives. This way of life is beautiful, and it is the antidote to the disconnection and division and despair and brutality of life right now.

Isaiah closes by reminding us that *God knows what God is doing*—it's as natural as the earth bringing forth its shoots, or the garden that causes what is sown in it to spring up—even *in the midst of death and darkness, light and life will not be denied*. The Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations—*God refuses to let death and darkness have the last word*.

We have a part to play in all of this. Isaiah did, and so do we. Even as we pray like we have never prayed before the sentiment of our Collect this morning: Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us—even as we cry this prayer, we do so holding fast to the deepest of hope, so aware that the spirit of the Lord GOD is indeed upon us, making peace with the fact that WE have been anointed to proclaim, to speak good news into this moment, and to take our place next to brothers and sisters as we set about repairing all this devastation.

On this **Gaudete Sunday**, on this **Rejoice Sunday**, **WE** are to be a people of joy, ready and able to offer comfort to those who are mourning.

Dear People of God, you are oaks, strong and steady and sure—share your strength with those so in need of it right now *until* they too can see and understand and know that *they* are the planting of the Lord, living and breathing the glory of God. Amen.

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