

Isaiah 61:1-11

The hallmark words for Advent have long been hope and expectation. Today's reading from Isaiah, was probably written at the end of the exile of Israel in Babylon and sometime after the return of some of those exiles to what was left of Jerusalem. The Babylonian empire which had conquered Jerusalem had itself been conquered by the Persian empire. The Persian king, influenced by the prophet Daniel, issued a proclamation allowing the citizens of Judah to return home. Many did, but when they arrived they found their city in ruin, and their homeland ruled by a puppet king.

The opening verse, "He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed", sets up who this message is for: people who are coming home from exile. Consider this: many of those returning could be second or even third generation Israelites. They have no memory of the good old days, and have relied on the stories of their parents and grandparents. The splendour of the time before the fall of Jerusalem was probably overstated as a perfect city. When the exiles arrive, they see a city that is in ruins. It would take years to restore the city of Jerusalem.

The prophet Haggai describes the great disappointment felt by those returnees after their attempts to rebuild the city and the temple had resulted in a paltry imitation of their memories of the grandeur of the place. "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?" It is likely that none of those who returned had ever seen the first temple of Solomon, since the Israelite captives had been in Babylon for at least fifty years.

However, those who had seen it had certainly filled the ears of their children and grandchildren with its wonders and had instilled in them the surging desire to return to the holy place and rebuild what the Babylonians had destroyed. Reality had not begun to match their fervent desires.

Many of the returnees probably have a memory of the old days and maybe that memory is partly a fiction they told themselves as they lived in exile. When they return to see ruins overgrown with weeds, reality comes crashing in and the prophet Isaiah is there to preach hope, to heal broken hearts shattered by the reality they face. Something that was once complete and holy, was desecrated and thrown down. The holiness of life that was exemplified in their community - is gone. Isaiah gives the broken hearted words of hope.

The prophet speaks of ruins rebuilt, deserted places filled, cities restored. What was broken is being restored. That is why when God says, "They shall build up ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations", there is something about it that feels right.

God was speaking of Jerusalem - the Holy City, the City of David, the place that housed the Ark of the Covenant, and thereby the very presence of God himself. It was in ruins, but those ruins will be "built up" and repaired, not in an act of historical refurbishment, but in a new way - in a new form.

Isaiah talks about proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vindication. The Year of the Lord is referring to the Year of Jubilee. In

Leviticus, we learn that the Year of Jubilee is something that occurs once every 50 years. It is a year that focuses less on commerce and more on wealth distribution and justice. In Leviticus we read: “The fiftieth year will be a Jubilee year for you. Do not plant, do not harvest the secondary growth, and do not gather from the freely growing vines because it is a Jubilee: it will be holy to you. You can eat only the produce directly out of the field. Each of you must return to your family property in this year of Jubilee.”

There is no evidence that such a year ever actually took place. If it never happened, it is still hoped for here in Isaiah. The prophet still hopes for the year of the Lord or something like it, this prophecy is in the **not yet**. And, more important than the ruined buildings, was the faith of Israel that was in tatters. It was in the renewal of their faith and hope, that God, who brought them out of the fiery furnace and lion’s den in ages past, would once again work his wonders.

It doesn’t take much looking around these days to see things in ruins - economies, jobs, lives, relationships, childhoods, educations, and health; the list is endless. But, our God is a God who builds up and restores, who makes all things new. And this is the God who has invited us along, to pick up a hammer and get to work rebuilding and refashioning the world around us, and the faith that has been entrusted to us and handed down to us by prophets, priests, apostles and forebears through the ages.

Where do we find the ruins in our world today? We see ruins in our communities - the homeless in the streets; the refugees who have left behind war-torn cities in rubble in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Ukraine.

Everything that was familiar and everyone they knew were gone.

We see ruins in our churches - in the lack of commitment and participation; the lack of genuine welcome; not taking the gospel beyond the front doors of our churches. We see ruins in our neighbourhoods - neighbours who don't even know who lives next door; who are totally oblivious to a neighbour's needs. Where are the places that you see and instantly identify something as heart-breaking, truly heart-breaking - because right there is where God needs **us**. It's where he plants **us** - to be agents of rebuilding, refashioning, and hope - in places like Gaza and Ukraine, even among the ashes and crumbling, gnarled, and ancient stones; in places like our indigenous communities with deteriorating, mouldy buildings, lack of clean water, and youth suicides brought on by despair; in our cities riddled with drug overdose deaths and homeless people.

The vision of God's kingdom espoused in Isaiah seems more "not yet" than "already". When Jesus proclaims the advent of the Jubilee with his coming, it seems like a radical resurrecting of the concept. It is a promise of relief sorely needed in occupied Palestine, where the religious leaders practised the rule of oppression just like the Romans had. But it never happened.

Jesus identified the first two verses of Isaiah: "the time of the Lord's favour has come, and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies", as a prophecy regarding himself, the Messiah, when he read from the prophet, as recorded in Luke's gospel. In spite of Christ's commitment to the least of these, large segments of the Western church insist on spiritualising Christ's mission so that it focusses on poverty of spirit or spiritual blindness - an

interpretive move that allows injustice to persist unabated and unthreatened by prophetic witness.

Members of many churches worship Western individualism and free market more than the ethical responsibility for the “other”, as encouraged by Jesus. Our individual economic decisions are often destructive to the overall well-being of fellow citizens as many Christians have neglected one of the church’s primary responsibilities.

Christ’s mission is the **church’s mission**, especially since he promised **we** would do greater works. This means that good news should continue to be preached to the poor. The broken-hearted should be healed and the captives should be freed. The mourning should be comforted and the despairing should exult in the grace of God.

In our rush to render these principles spiritual, we forget that James’ proclamation regarding faith - that without works it is dead - is firmly correlated with how the poor are often treated by Christians. James asks: *“What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone?”* James writes this after he has condemned classism within the church, where the rich are being given preferred seating and treatment and the poor were being ignored. How rare it is to hear political discourse centred around these verses!

God announces: *“For I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully reward my people for their suffering and make an everlasting*

covenant with them.” The perpetual economic inequality that robs the poor to give to the rich on national and international levels ... God hates. When consumers storm the doors of shopping malls to bicker and tussle over imported goods made by workers treated as slaves within export processing zones ... God is not pleased. When the gap between the rich and the poor expands yearly, and the poor lack access to health care, and are forced to die of preventable diseases such as AIDS, malaria, TB, Hepatitis, and measles ... God burns with anger. When globally, money spent on the military is enough to feed all the world’s hungry and educate the world’s children ... God’s heart breaks.

In Luke’s gospel, Jesus gave this passage from Isaiah new meaning. He was worshipping in his home synagogue in Nazareth. When it was his turn to speak he rose and read this particular text. After doing so, he declared himself to be the ultimate fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy. He said that he was the Messiah the people had been waiting for. Things did not end well for him that day.

So, let’s focus on the kind of Messiah, and the kind of kingdom, that the prophet Isaiah was describing. The salvation that was proclaimed recognized the present reality of ashes, mourning, and injustice. And faith that does not take account of sin in the world is utterly unrealistic.

While the promise is that God will offer restoration and an overthrow of the ways of the world, it is not a pledge of military conquest. The prophet uses an agricultural metaphor to describe a kingdom that rises from the ashes of the world as it is. The restoration will come up in small shoots until someday

it will be more prosperous, just, and peaceful than anything that was ever experienced before.

Jesus chose not to be a military leader. The people offered him the chance to storm the gates of Jerusalem. Instead, he chose to be the kind of Messiah Isaiah promised. He worked, planting the seeds of a kingdom that would someday bring about the downfall of the Roman Empire itself.

The Bible reminds us that this process is not yet done. As the body of Christ in this world, **we are called** to tend his garden. **We are called** to follow a king who rejected military domination and earthly power. **We are called** to find our power in the slow work of salvation, justice, and peace. If Christ is king, the prophet Isaiah reminds us exactly of the kind of work we are to be doing, because we have seen him on the throne and experienced a foretaste of his kingdom.

The Year of Jubilee may never have taken place as written, but there might be glimpses of Jubilee. On Saturday morning in the winter of 1990, news reports broke into regular programming to say that Nelson Mandela, the leader of the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, was going to be released from prison after 27 years in captivity. The next morning television networks around the world captured the moment when a gray-haired gentleman stepped out of prison and into freedom for the first time in decades.

Maybe the Year of Jubilee isn't like it is written in Leviticus or how the prophet/messenger longed for. But in Luke 4 Jesus states that the prophecy

was being fulfilled by him. Could it be that in Jesus, we will see small moments of a Year of Jubilee?

The joy that sustains our priestly work is that we know our King Jesus has come, and will come again. And when he comes all creation will be set free in a forever Jubilee. In the meantime, **our work** as God's priestly people is to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and to comfort all who mourn. **Our work** is to be God's good news to the poor. To keep on binding up the brokenhearted, and proclaiming release for captives, and liberation for prisoners - and not by spiritualising Christ's mission but by **actively** taking part in it. And today's Advent Candle of Joy, is a reminder that we are to keep spreading the joy that Jesus has brought into our lives.

We lose our joy when we lose sight of our pilgrim status; when we forget that we are moving through God's story that moves from creation to new creation; that we are journeying toward a new heaven and new earth and a forever Jubilee; when all creation will know the joy of release from the exile of sin; when God will make right what sin and death have made wrong. Let us be reminded that we are pilgrims on a journey, travelling the way Jesus has made for us. And so let us find joy in our Advent journey.

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT DECEMBER 15, 2024

As the darkness awaits the dawn, so we await the One who is to come. Let us pray together in expectation: for Creation, for our communities, and for all those in need. Creator of all living and non-living beings, who illuminates every circumstance and time of darkness, we give you thanks that you have looked on the messiness of our lives to be good soil for your Holy Word to be planted. Help us to hear your sacred stories of regeneration and transformation as promises of new life for this generation and for generations to come.

As nations mark Human Rights Day (Dec 10), may we act to uphold the universal commitment to equality, freedom, and human dignity. We pray that governments worldwide will ensure their people have adequate health care and adequate, sustainable services and programs for the provision of food, clothing, housing, and social welfare. May the safety and well-being of all be of paramount priority in the minds of decision makers. May all the earth be captured by the will to love.

We pray for all of the earth that is waiting -- creatures who are waiting for protection because their environment has been destroyed; waterways that are waiting for renewal because they have been contaminated; lands that are waiting to be redeemed from pollution and exploitation because we have forgotten that God called the land good. In the midst of the global impact of increasing extreme weather events and natural disasters precipitated by climate change, we wait. Throughout the world, in and on and under it, waiting happens, waiting grows and gathers, the earth is pregnant waiting for redemption. Creator God, make all things new, healthy, and teeming with life.

Let us pray for nations in distress, especially those of the Middle East and Ukraine, Syria, Sudan and Haiti. As religious observances of many faith traditions are held in these upcoming days peace seems an elusive hope and dream for many around the world. We thank you for the cease fire in Lebanon. We pray for all who are caught in war torn areas of the world, both soldiers and civilians; we pray for world leaders and local governments; for

refugees and prisoners; for peacekeepers; for NGOs including Lutheran World Relief providing necessities to those in need; for subsistence farmers and small business owners.

In a world of rich resources, we are mindful of the huge inequalities that exist between the 1% of the world who are privileged and the rest of humanity that is less fortunate. Help us, who are blessed with so much, remember the poor, the homeless, the lonely, and the forgotten, not only in thought, but also in acts of lovingkindness, for they are our brothers and sisters. Use us, use our hands and feet, to show caring, giving, and helping as ways to be your incarnation. And may we see you present in those we meet.

O God, in days to come your kin-dom will be established, and your joy shall reign. We pray for the church universal: for our partners in full communion including the Anglican Church in Canada and their leaders Bishop Anna and Anglican Primate Anne Germond; for the Moravian congregations and their pastors; for our ELCIC Bishops Susan and Kathy, for all pastors, deacons, and lay leaders, musicians and volunteers; for the congregation of Shepherd of the Valley in Comox; for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; our sister congregation in Peru and Pastor Ana Maria Jara; our seminaries in Saskatoon and Waterloo and all faculty and seminary students, that you might teach us your ways and that we might walk in your Way.

We pray for all who are waiting; people who are waiting for an end to violence because they have known too much in their families, in their communities; people waiting for news both joyful and heartbreaking; people who are waiting for healing as they live with sickness and physical or emotional pain; for those who are homebound; We bring before you those in our hearts or situations that need your healing presence ...

In the fulness of time, O God, you sent your son, Jesus, to be born to a young maiden, Mary and her betrothed, Joseph. And his name was Emmanuel: God With Us. We thank you for coming to be present with us. And we live believing that you are always present with those whom we love but see no longer.

In this Advent season of waiting in expectation draw us together in your love

that our praise and worship might echo in these walls and also through our lives. In this Advent of expectation draw us together in mission, that the hope within might be the song we sing and be the melody of our lives. In this Advent of expectation draw us together in service, that the path we follow might lead us from a stable to a glimpse of your kin-dom come near.

Help us, Lord, to open our hearts and our arms in support of all your people. Only you can give them a peace that passes all understanding in their lives, and in their hearts. Let us share the joy and spirit of your Son's birth with all we meet, with those who will be joining us for worship, as well as with our own families, friends and neighbours. In Jesus' holy name we pray.

Amen.

With joy and gladness let us pray as Jesus taught us ...

Our Father ...