

**Joy: Unleashed**  
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
December 14, 2008

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
To proclaim release to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
To provide for those who mourn in Zion –  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.  
They shall build up the ancient ruin,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
They shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations...

For I the Lord love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.  
Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;  
All who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.  
I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
As a bridegroom decks himself with garland,  
as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

The word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

There are eleven days left. Eleven days until Christmas morning. Eleven days to trim the tree, hang the stockings, plan the menu, finish your shopping.

There are eleven days left. Eleven days to put on your smile, to spread good tidings, to get caught up in the joy of the season. Eleven days. The pressure is on.

So what happens if – at this time of year when you are supposed to be joyful, and lighthearted, and free from worry...a beacon of Christmas Cheer – what happens if you can't be those things?

A friend and member of my preaching group voiced what every preacher knows – that when we stand here and look out at our congregations we see people's faces, but also their stories. "Sometimes I wish I could name them all, out loud," she said, "and help us to see our common humanity in ways that the [false] strength we present never could or can."<sup>1</sup>

Grief. Shame. Economic anxiety. Job loss. Broken relationships. Crises of faith. An abiding sense of loneliness. Miscarriage. A crushing feeling of responsibility.

Substance abuse. Depression. Cancer. Poverty. Lack of purpose or direction.

Are any of these your story? I know they are. I see these stories when I look into your faces.

There are eleven days left until Christmas – eleven days to cave into the pressure to have it all together and to be joyful. And yet for many of us, all the lights, carols, presents, and parties in the world can't cover up the fact that we are not joyful – at least not in the sense that we see advertised during this time of year.

The foundation of joy is hope. And for us, too often, our hope is misplaced in the things of this world – those things that will always disappoint.

Will Willamon talks about this contrived sense of joy and hope in an article written a few years ago. He asks, "If we are doing so well, why do we drink so much at parties? If we are so happy, why must we so forcefully reassure ourselves and silence those who disagree? If we are so happy, why must we talk about it so much?"

And then Willamon gets right to the point, "The hope for us, says the church in Advent, is that we are out of hope, and we know it. No! to all false consolation, we say. No! to the empty, contrived merriment of a terminal world. Our hope must be in someone out there who comes to us. We find our way only because [this] One [who is Jesus the Christ] comes, takes our hand, and leads us home."<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> Straight, Anna Pinckney (Portable Snack, 2008, Kansas City). I am grateful to Anna for her pastoral take on this text which has shaped my preaching here.

<sup>2</sup> Willamon, William. (Going Against the Stream, The Christian Century, December 19-26, 1984) as cited in Rev. Straight's paper.

I will tell you that as I studied this week in preparation for this sermon I was a little nervous. No one wants to be perceived as throwing a wet blanket on the joy of the Christmas season. We all sense the tremendous pressure to present a happy face – and this preacher felt it, too.

Why not just gloss over what is really going on in our lives and focus on the positive? Why this talk of pain and hopelessness and unmet expectation? It is almost Christmas!

True. Yet don't each of us know the deep satisfaction that comes from finally being honest? Haven't we all discovered the sense of belonging and connectedness that happens when we share our true hurts?

This Advent season, as we prepare ourselves to receive the Christ child – the Word made flesh – perhaps this is the best time to acknowledge how much we depend on the mercy of God to bear us up and bind us up. Perhaps this is the best time to acknowledge the fact that we are not always okay. After all, it is almost Christmas. We cannot appreciate the saving mystery of God's incarnation if we pretend we don't need saving. Our brokenness is the reason why God chose to enter the world at all.

\* \* \*

Let me tell you about the people who first heard today's scripture. They were a group who had been exiled – run out of town, out of the place that they had been promised by God; a place called Zion. For generations they were spread over the region – with nothing to hold onto except the promise that, eventually, God would be faithful and restore them to their land.

In this part of Isaiah, the exiles do return – but they return to “a homeland and a temple in ruins. The home they expected turns out to be a place filled with disappointment, disillusionment, and division.”<sup>3</sup>

It is to these people that Isaiah's words come: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted...to provide for those who mourn in Zion –  
to give them garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

The foundation of joy is hope, and for the people who heard this good news – their hope was not found in pretending that everything was okay...they were well-beyond the time when they could live that lie. Instead, their hope was found in trusting that God would make well that which was broken.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jarvis, Cythia (*Feasting on the Word*, David Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds) p. 52.

This passage from Isaiah is specific about the kinds of people to whom God comes: the brokenhearted, the oppressed, the prisoner, those who mourn. It is to these that the Spirit of God comes and transforms their mourning into gladness; their faint spirits into a mantle of praise. Not in a Hallmark kind of way – not through magic that takes away the memory of the hurt or the pain – but in a holy fashion...a kind of holy compassion...that acknowledges the hurt and bears it up with eyes focused on a future that is full of promise and salvation.

\* \* \*

The gospel writer Luke tells us that in his first sermon, the One for whom we wait sat down in the temple and opened the scroll of Isaiah to the passage that we have heard today. Jesus looked out at a people he had come to save and read: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed...”

And when he finished reading this passage he said “today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

In Jesus, God entered into the world of our brokenness not to assure that everything was okay, but to assure that God would be with us. With us in all of our broken places – and also ahead of us where all will be well.

It is this hope that is the source of our joy as we lead up to Christmas. A joy that is unencumbered by the forced merriment of the season. A joy that is unhitched from the wagon of having it all together. Unleashed from our need to pretend that everything is okay.

Our joy stems from being able to relinquish ourselves from the bourdon of generating hope – and surrendering ourselves to the truth that we know: That “[o]ur hope must be in someone out there who comes to us. We find our way only because [this] One[who is Jesus the Christ] comes, takes our hand, and leads us home.”

\* \* \*

It is God’s irony that, many times, it is through those who suffer that we discover deep lessons of life. And so I share with you a part of an email that Les Morgan sent recently.

Many of you know that our congregation has been vigilant and fervent in our prayers for Les and Cindy Morgan’s son, Everett, a 23 year old member of this church who has been fighting Ewing’s Sarcoma.

A few weeks ago, the last glimmer of hope for a cure vanished and Everett began moving toward hospice care as he prepared to die. It was upon hearing that news that Les sent this email:

“Seeing the devastating physical effects of cancer in your own son and feeling his pain in your own heart is, I believe, the kind of suffering Jesus was referring to when he said, “Blessed are those who mourn [for they shall be comforted].” God has given me a glimpse of that blessing as I help Everett through his overwhelming illness; for the pain I feel in my heart has set in bold relief the love that dwells therein, and now, more clearly than ever, I can see the eternal bond of love I share with my son.

After learning at the hospital that the cancer had spread, Everett and I came home and sat together quietly in his room. We did not discuss the details of the medical reports or their implications. Rather, we remained silent, in the unspoken communication of a father and son. Finally I buried my head in his shoulder and wept and wept. It was he, the suffering one, who comforted me, by gently rubbing my back and holding me close to himself. The son for whom I mourn has become the blessing that will carry me through his illness. And I know in my heart the bond of love we share will last forever.”

Do you see the hope within this testimony? The testimony of a broken-hearted father? It is not a hope everyone can grasp. It is the hope of love eternal – a love found in the Word made Flesh who entered into the brokenness of this world for the sake of binding us up and calling us home.

It is this kind of hope that is the foundation of true joy – a joy not of this world, but of God’s coming kingdom.

And so this Advent season we pray: Come Lord Jesus. Come soon.

+++

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.