

“Joy Through Adversity”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
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Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

One of the hardest things over the last nine months for me to experience or “catch” is joy. Maybe you’ve experienced that, too, especially over the last few weeks. It’s like a firefly at night: you see it light up and you can almost grab it, but then it goes dark and disappears from your grasp. As we have all walked this journey of a pandemic, and particularly the surge we are experiencing right now in Indiana, it can be very difficult to feel joy. I would even say that we’re almost discouraged from experiencing joy, with the torrent of negative numbers and news of Covid-19 that we continue to witness in our community.

But that doesn’t mean that joy isn’t present in our world or in our individual lives. At the Bible study on Tuesday, some of us commented about how we still experience joy during these hard times – we just may have to look a bit more closely to find it. One person shared about the joy of being outdoors during some of the recent mild weather we have had, and how that brought her joy. Another person commented about how it was a joy to see so many share their gifts and talents in the Christmas Program on Sunday evening. I commented that it was a joy to welcome a first-time visitor last Sunday, and how it’s been a joy to see so many more people participate on Sundays because of our capability to live-stream our services now. Even amid these dark and difficult times, there are moments when we feel like we’ve caught that elusive firefly in the mason jar.

And yet, when we are experiencing crises or suffering through long-stretches of challenge, joy is not something we see or feel or experience as easily or readily. It’s hard to feel joyful when you don’t know where your next paycheck is going to come from. It’s hard to feel joyful when you are still left with unanswered questions about your loved one’s health. It’s hard to feel joyful when you’re trying to juggle school and applying to college and extracurricular activities and everyone else’s expectations of you. It’s hard to feel joyful when you’re afraid and anxious – and you don’t know why.

We each – at some point in our lives – know what it feels like to be weighed down, to be burdened, to being held captive by forces which seem beyond our control. You may be feeling that today, this morning, this moment – or you may not be, and instead it was a time in your past. But we all know how it feels to be far from joy, and it feels like the waiting is intolerable and never-ending.

Waiting is inherent in this season of Advent. It would not be Advent without having to wait. But the waiting is not a fruitless exercise. It has a purpose, even if we can’t always understand it. That purpose is to know and experience God’s joy – even joy through adversity – which releases us from our

captivity to darkness and sin, and leads us into hope and promise, even when it seems that such hope is unattainable.

Our text today is from the prophet Isaiah. But one thing to keep in mind is that the book of Isaiah can more readily be understood as three different books or sections. The first two sections, up to chapter 55, reflect the prophet first prophesying to his people of the exile to come, and then prophesying to them while they are in exile in Babylon. The third section, from which our text comes today, is spoken to the Israelites after they have returned from exile, but while they are still living under foreign rule. Their perceived glorious return from exile has not taken place, and they are suffering from economic oppression and harsh living conditions (HarperCollins Study Bible, NRSV, introductory notes, 1012-1013). In other words, what they had hoped would be a great homecoming has turned into a sour dose of hard reality.

It is to this context that the prophet speaks. And what the prophet speaks of is redemption for his oppressed people. Isaiah uses words of change to bring forth God's message to his chosen people. "Bind up the brokenhearted . . . release to the prisoners . . . liberty to the captives . . . comfort all who mourn . . . build up the ancient ruins . . . raise up the former devastations . . . repair the ruined cities" (61:1-4). The prophet opens his proclamation by giving the people hope that their current condition will not be permanent. The prophet gives specific ways that God's hope will come to the Israelites – and perhaps, we are reminded of the specific ways God brings hope to us, and calls on us to share hope in particular, meaningful ways.

In the second half of this passage, the prophet assures his listeners that God is aware of who is causing them suffering, and that God's people will be restored as a light to the world. "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; and all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed" (61:8-9). In other words, Isaiah tells the people that their redemption by God shall be a sign to the world that God's kingdom is not something far in the future, but is happening in the here and now.

And Isaiah uses images from nature throughout this passage to illustrate his point. In the first half, he says, "They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory" (61:3). The Lord's joy in his people will be like the tallest of the trees in nature, as God's righteousness will stretch forth like the tall canopies of the forest. And in verse eleven, the prophet says, "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" (61:11). Our Bible study reflected that this reminded us of the crocus that spring-up in late-winter and early-spring from the desolate winter landscape, reminding us of the promise of God's hope and joy.

That last reference also recalled for me a story I heard on the radio this past week. Earlier this year, the western United States was ravaged by wildfires, including the Big Basin Redwoods in California. Many of these ancient, towering

trees were damaged and destroyed by the fires that engulfed the state. Amid the charred remains and ashes, though, there are today signs of hope. New growth is springing forth at the base of many of these towering trees. And at a height of 200-feet, there are signs of green stems sprouting forth from the charred branches of these redwoods (<https://www.npr.org/2020/12/08/943285877/californias-ancient-redwoods-face-new-challenge-from-wildfires-and-warming-clima>). Signs of hope amid the devastation. Signs of joy through great adversity. Signs that God has not and will not abandon us.

Scott Bader-Saye writes: *Theologically, these verses from Isaiah center around the themes of salvation and mission. Whenever we speak of salvation (which is from the same root as the word “save”), we need to ask the question, what are we being saved from? from God’s punishment? from the devil? from our own sins? from death? This way of thinking about salvation leads to an understanding of “mission” as the work of getting as many people as possible into heaven . . . In contrast to this, Isaiah challenges readers to name salvation as a quality of life here and now that reflects God’s desires for human community.*

What is salvation in Isaiah 61? It is good news, healing, liberty, release, and comfort. It is “the year of the Lord’s favor,” a reference to the jubilee year . . . Salvation is imaged as both a restored city (61:4) and as an abundant garden (61:11). And this recognition by the other nations reaffirms that Isaiah’s vision is not a promise of pie in the sky. God’s deliverance is real, tangible, and this-worldly. It can be seen by others . . .

(And we today) are invited to participate in this salvific living, even in the midst of a world not yet fully redeemed. Mission happens today when we turn our attention to those who are named as the recipients of the good news: the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mournful, the faint of spirit. In order to participate in God’s mission of restoration, the people of God are sent first to those who most need to hear that God will provide for them and will redeem their losses. Mission is not primarily something that goes out from God’s people – by sending money or sending missionaries – but something that defines God’s people, as existing for the sake of the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and mournful.

Mission also happens when the nations of the world notice that the people of God live differently, that “they are a people whom the Lord has blessed” (61:9) . . . To be missional is to live as a people of good news, liberation, justice, and comfort in such a way that the world may take notice and be drawn to the ways of God (Scott Bader-Saye, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2008: 50-54).

There’s another place that this passage from Isaiah is heard in the biblical witness. It is in the New Testament, from the Gospel of Luke, and it directly reminds us of who our redemptive joy is embodied in.

“When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day . . . He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the

captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'" (Luke 4:16-21).

In our season of waiting in Advent, we both receive and give redemptive joy when we comfort the brokenhearted and those who mourn. We both receive and give redemptive joy when we not only give of our money to those who are poor, but also sit, listen, and lift up those who are lowly and struggling amid life's crushing load. We both receive and give redemptive joy when we acknowledge our own brokenness and need for healing, and we provide a space for people to do the same. Redemptive joy is not superficial or sentimental; it is deep, real, and transforms us as people of God into the agents of joy to a hurting, broken world.

Where do you witness God's joy through adversity in these challenging times? A group of friends that has been central to me in my life the last decade has been the men and women who participated with me in the Wabash Pastoral Leadership Program. These pastors across Indiana and the country have become one of the primary support networks that God has blessed me with to lean on when life is hard. As I was on a Zoom call with them this past week, I witnessed God's joy shining in their lives as many of them are living through such deep adversity.

There is Mark, whose wife Christa has completed chemotherapy treatments for breast cancer, but will have a double mastectomy next month, followed by radiation treatments. I witnessed God's joy in his recalling how their church and community have showered them with love, support, and acts of kindness as they've walked this arduous road.

There is Pat, who is battling terminal cancer and will be on chemotherapy treatments the rest of her life. I witnessed God's joy in her sharing about so many things she is thankful for at this time – her church, her work, her family – and how she is very intentional and focused on looking for joy amid all that is happening around her.

There is Rex, who eleven years ago lost his wife to cancer after only being diagnosed four months earlier. I witnessed God's joy in his sharing about the new possibilities for ministry that excites him as he serves a new yoked Presbyterian parish in Eastern Indiana, and the joy of being a grandfather multiple times this year.

"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God." The darkness may seem everywhere. But the light of God's joy is coming – and the darkness shall not overcome it. Look around you and witness God's joy through the adversity, and believe that Emmanuel, God with Us, is coming soon.

Thanks be to God. Amen.