

"The Joy of Missional Living"

When the prophet Isaiah wrote these words, they were meant to be a source of encouragement to the Israelites who had returned to Jerusalem after 70 years of captivity in Babylon. Although they understood that God had brought about the Exile as punishment for their sins, they knew that they had received grace because God had also put into motion the events that brought them home. What joy to know that the promises they had received from Isaiah while living in Babylon had come true. They were still God's people! He had not forgotten them!

Yet, when they got there, the city and Temple that they loved had been lying in ruins for three quarters of a century. We can only imagine the weeds growing through what was left of the cedar that once lined the floors, the gold inlay having long been plundered by enemies of Yahweh. Or maybe we can see in our mind's eye the ivy strangling what was left of the great bronze pillars.

On top of the devastating physical condition of their homeland and what had been the center of their religious and national life, they were constantly threatened by the outlying nations who wanted to destroy them even as they rebuilt. The surrounding peoples had possessed the vacated land during those long years of captivity and were not willing to give up what they had acquired. They did not believe in the god who had promised the land to these former residents and therefore did not honor the promises that God made to them. The joy that the Israelites had experienced when they were told they could finally come home must have been fleeting as they felt abandoned by their God once again.

As I prayed for God to immerse my spirit into the emotions of those long ago children of Israel, I began to imagine that their feelings must have been similar to those who live in Southern California right now. With over 240,000 acres of land burning, smoke filling the air for miles, wildlife and people alike being displaced to find safety and thousands of weary firefighters trying to bring order to the chaos, I can only imagine that they could use some encouragement too.

And one line from Isaiah's prophecy seemed to leap off of the page each time I reread it. "to give them a garland instead of ashes". Would that the returning exiles were showered with help from surrounding nations who rejoiced that a defeated people were given a second chance. But instead they faced envy and greed and self-serving enemies. Would that the firefighters could replace the smoke that saturates their clothing and stings their eyes with the fragrance of fuchsia and sage that are normally blooming in California. Yet, the fires burn on.

But the joy of Advent is that these words of promise are not restricted to the Exiles who were trying to rebuild their lives or to the Californians who are hoping to rebuild also. These words of encouragement are for you and me, too! Because hasn't every person here faced similar disappointment, chaos, or devastation? Hasn't every person here suffered the loss of an innocence, a possession, an ability or a loved one? Haven't we all had a time of worry, sadness, exhaustion or defeat when we needed to hear that God was with us and would remove the ashes in our lives and give us a garland instead?

So we are all blessed that Isaiah begins this part of his message to the returning Exiles and to us with these words. "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives and the prisoners." So what we are really being told is that God will always give us the chance to right our wrongs, to start anew.

As we get closer to the birth of the baby in the manger and the start of a new year, wouldn't it be wonderful to correct some mistake that we've made this year. To start over in a certain area of our lives. As we prepare to welcome the Christ child into our hearts once again, what joy and hope to realize that this also prepares the way for us to have a clean slate. The child in the manger is also the God of new beginnings because he became the man on the cross, sent to save us from our sins.

That is why Jesus chose these very words to preach from in the first sermon that he delivered when he began his ministry. In his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus announced that to right the wrongs of the world was his main mission. Jesus came to set creation right, to return it to God's intended design. And what a joy that we can be a part of the new things that God is doing.

One joy of the Advent season is that we have the opportunity, by participating in this mission with Jesus, to spread God's righteousness. Indeed to share the Good News! Both Isaiah and Jesus remind us that the first step to making things new is to examine how we went wrong in the first place. The Exiles had been in Babylon for seventy years. That means that some of those who returned had been small children when they left but many had been born in captivity. Only a few of the very old had made the journey with them but what a gift that would have been. Because even though they must have been devastated at the sight of the ruins of their once beloved city, they could at least share the vision of what things had been like when God's people were living in righteousness. And they could also share the stories of how they had strayed.

This is important for us as well. In order to bring about restoration, to be a part of the solution of making things new, *we* often have to peer into the past to remember what life was like before things got so out of whack! And this means that we have to be honest with ourselves

about our part in what has gone wrong. It means asking ourselves tough questions. How do I need to change in order to allow God's transformation to take place in me, in the situation and ultimately the world? And to realize that restoration of right living not only takes honesty but patience with others and perhaps even harder, with ourselves.

Isaiah's words also remind us of the joy that we can receive when we step outside of our own circumstances and seek to right what is wrong in the world. The prophet was sent to a divided nation. There were rival groups in Judah, leaders who looked only after personal gain and court systems that were riddled with corruption. Some of the Exiles did not want to return and refused to be a part of the restoration.

Of course, we know that God's people in Jesus' day were divided too. The Roman government that held the Israelites captive was corrupt in every way. And God's people were divided over who this Jesus of Nazareth was and what God was really calling them to do. And to say that *we* live in a time of divisiveness today is simply an understatement!

As God's modern day disciples, if we are to receive the joy that comes with righting what is wrong, to be about participating in Jesus' mission of healing and restoration, then we too must seek to heal divisions in our world. "So long as Christians live as divided people, known to the world as those who judge, fight and exclude, the church will fail to be missional, no matter how many missionaries it sends" (1) or how many good deeds it does.

Just as the Exiles had been sent home to a nation filled with disappointment, disillusionment and division, so Jesus' followers were experiencing the same emotions as they found their excitement and acceptance of the Messiah being thwarted at every turn. And the same issues threaten to undo us as well.

Some would say that we, as American Christians have grown rich in nothing and poor in soul. But Advent reminds us that, by our belief in the joy that the baby in Bethlehem brings to us all, we too can bring release to the captives. We too can help the oppressed experience freedom. We too can proclaim the year of the Lord's favor – a reference to the year of Jubilee when all debts are settled and when God's creatures and all of creation are given a chance to experience Sabbath. A tie of returning to Jesus' mission of unity.

Our captives today are no different from those in the days of Isaiah or of Jesus. We are called to proclaim the Good News to those who are experiencing the pain of severed relationships. To those who battle addiction, depression, and live with the stigmas of mental illness. Our souls need to be freed from self-doubt and self-hatred and the fear of speaking the truth in love. We are called to not only comfort the elderly and homeless and children who go to bed hungry but to change their lives in the ways that we can.

Friends, the truth is that our congregation, our community and our world are as much the little town "where hope and fears of all the years are met" as Bethlehem was. So we are called to live as people of the Good News! We are called to live out the mission that Jesus proclaimed when he preached that first sermon. And when we do, we experience the joy of Advent.

But the truth is that we cannot find this joy on our own, with no help from God. And I am sure that is why the scholars who chose the lectionary passages for today paired Isaiah's words with Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances." Friends, there is no way that the Exiles or Jesus' disciples or you and I could possibly participate in the mission of Jesus Christ without prayer.

I would never attempt to write a sermon, prepare a lesson or make a visit to the hospital without praying for wisdom and guidance first. And sometimes, even THAT is not enough. I

have to call in reinforcements! There are a few special pray-ers right in this sanctuary who have gotten me through sermon writing, the funeral of someone I love and a meeting that I feared would turn contentious.

And isn't that a part of missional living as well. God gave us each other to rely on. He did not send ONE Exile back to Jerusalem to start over. He did not ask Jesus to carry out his ministry without help, as dim witted as his chosen helpers often proved they were! And he does not expect one church, one family, or one person to make everything new. He asks us to work together. To build one another up. To make up for the gifts that I lack by relying on the gifts that you have. And to pray with and fro one another. God expects us – no God calls us – to BE the church. The Body of Christ that can bring God's mission to life.

Advent reminds us that we NEED a savior. We always have and always will. From the fall of Adam to the absurdity of American politics, the world is flawed. But we are God's world. The sheep of God's pasture. And God is the God of grace, of second chances, of a new day and new beginnings and new life.

The Joy of Advent remind us that we HAVE a savior. Over two thousand years ago, God looked down in love and saw the oppressed, the captives, the hurting and sent his son to change us and show us a better way.

And the Joy of Missional Living is that we can SHARE the savior. Every time we show a kindness in the spirit of Christ, every time we extend a hand in love to someone who hurting, every time we offer forgiveness to ourselves, we are sharing the savior. And the child in Bethlehem, the mission of Christ, indeed the Spirit of Christmas lives in you and me. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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(1) Scott Bader-Saye, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 1, John Knox, Westminster Press, 2008, page 54.