**December 13, 2020 Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

***Joy***

**Scripture:** Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 NRSV

*(1)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 liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; (2)to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; (3)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. (4)They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. … (8)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. (9)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. (10)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 a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (11)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.*

**Notes:**

1. The Year of ***Jubilee*** was good for everyone.
   1. A year set aside to ***reset*** the entire economic system.
   2. A year of grace, hope, and tremendous ***joy***.
2. God wants to use the people’s despair, for a new ***beginning***.
   1. The ashes will be ***transformed*** into fertile ground.
   2. This is a place to ***start*** ***over***.
   3. ***Sin*** and ***mistakes*** of the past can be left behind.
3. The children of God are called to participate in the joyful ***renewal*** that God is enacting in the world.
   1. The people of God will act in ***just*** ***ways***.
   2. We are called to be in ***partnership*** with God.
4. ***Joy*** is ultimately not about circumstances but about the ***hope*** of what God is going to do, and the fruit of God and the people of God working together in the world.
   1. God is at work ***transforming*** hardship into beauty.
   2. God will ***transform*** the worst into life.
   3. Working with God brings ***good*** ***news*** for the poor.
   4. We are called to be ***joy*** ***bringers*** in the world.
5. In the midst of our despair and pain, God is at ***work***.
   1. We can have ***joy***.
   2. This work of ***joy*** is one we participate in.
   3. There is unspeakable ***joy*** despite our circumstances.
   4. Go into the world as bearers of ***joy***, as ***rebuilders*** and share the good news for all people today.

**Script:**

What brings you joy? For me, Joy is found in the simplest of things in life; the warm smile of a friend; the laughter of children; pets playing in the yard; or seeing an older couple holding hands as if they were youngsters dating. These are the things that bring me Joy. What brings you joy? Many find joy in things that touch their heart. Do you only see it during this time of year; or do you see it all year long? Does it have to make you happy, or does it just move you in some deep way in your innermost being?

Joy is often interpreted this time of year in a “holly jolly Christmas” sort of way. Upbeat songs play in every store you enter. Lights and tinsel are placed on every available surface. The glimmer and shine of everything around us can often distract from a harsh reality; the fact that so many of us don’t feel very holly jolly this time of year; in fact many fall into a depression or deep despair. For many of us, these lights aren’t quite bright enough to erase the pain of grief; the darkness of poverty; the loneliness of heartache. There is just not enough tinsel to cover up despair. We might have even walked into church this morning and seen the pink candle of joy, and rolled our eyes a bit at the impossibility of it all, thinking that joy is an unattainable state for those living in darkness.

These are fair thoughts for a day like today, and a text like this text. Join me in the reading of todays passage, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. And stand with me as we share.

(1)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 liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; (2)to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; (3)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. (4)They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. … (8)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. (9)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. (10)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 a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (11)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. Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 NRSV

The people of God are lost in hopelessness and despair. Looking over the ruins of Jerusalem, they are grief-stricken at all they have lost. Not only are they living in the midst of a hopeless situation, not only are they wondering where their peace went, but they are also wondering if there will ever be joy again. Yet, in this world of pain and sorrow, the prophet Isaiah preaches words; not just of hope, not just of peace, but words of joy. Good news for all who hear: the pain and sorrow they feel, can and will be replaced with joy, unspeakable joy.

*The Year of Jubilee was good for everyone.* There are four primary economic codes for the children of God in Israel. First is tithing: 10 percent of what is made or raised or grown goes into storehouses for the care of the priests and the poor. Second is Sabbath: every seventh day is a day of rest and worship, and every seventh year is one of rest for the land and the animals. Third is gleaning: the edges of fields are to be left unharvested in order that the poor, the refugee, and the traveler may find food. Fourth is the Year of Jubilee: after seven cycles of sabbath years, that would be 49 years, one year, the fiftieth year, was to be set aside as the Year of Jubilee. The purpose of this year was to reset the entire economic system: debts were to be forgiven, land returned, prisoners set free.

The Bible records evidence that the children of God followed the first three economic laws, but there isn’t any recorded proof that they observed the Year of Jubilee. Isaiah 61 is about the Year of Jubilee, which is also called “the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Imagine what good news it would be to experience a Year of Jubilee. Your debts would be forgiven! That would mean no longer feeling that knot in your stomach when the person you owe comes around. It would mean the ability to invest in new ideas and it would be a new chance to follow your passions. Your family’s land would be returned to you! Land ownership would mean security. It would mean a place to grow food and raise animals; two very important things in an agrarian society, two things that are a key to survival. You would be released from prison! Back then, one of the most common reasons to imprison someone was because they couldn’t pay their debts. Jubilee therefore meant debt forgiveness and release from captivity for some. This offered the opportunity to start again.

A Year of Jubilee meant a year of grace, hope, and tremendous joy for everyone. *What the people look upon as despair, God wants to use for a new beginning.* The hopelessness of the lost city, of trampled gardens, of burned homes, God is going to transform to joy. The ashes of this place are going to be transformed into fertile ground in which new life is born. A crown will replace the ashes. This is a place to start over; it is a level playing field that will give them the opportunity to become the people God has called them to be. “They will be called oaks of righteousness” Which means they are going to become a righteous (justice-loving) people. The sin and mistakes of their past can be left behind in the rubble, and they can start a new life. “They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.” They will begin to build a life brand new.

*The children of God are called to participate in the joyful renewal that God is enacting in the world.* Even though it is ultimately God who is bringing about healing, hope, and joy, it is clear that humanity is invited to participate in this work. Verse 3 talks about their righteousness, which implies that they will participate in right actions, living out God’s justice in the world. Verse 4 says “they will rebuild,” and “they will renew.” The people of God are actively joining God’s restoration work. The people of God are called to do the work of God. Verse 8 talks about how God hates injustice. The implication is that the people of God will act in just ways. Verse 8 also talks about hating wrongdoing but rewarding righteousness and justice. One of the ways we see justice and righteousness being enacted in the world is in the ways that God is going to bring about the Year of Jubilee, which will include good news for the poor, binding up of the brokenhearted, freedom from captivity, release from the darkness, and comfort for those who mourn. These are all active ways that God is going to usher in Jubilee, but the people of God were called and still are called to enact these things in the world in partnership with God. The work of Jubilee is a cooperation between God and the people of God. We can see holiness lived out in the ways God and the people of God work together in bringing about the kingdom of God on earth.

*Joy is ultimately not about circumstances but about the hope of what God is going to do, and the fruit of God and the people of God working together in the world.* We don’t know for sure whether Israel ever observed the Year of Jubilee, but whether they did or did not, their call to celebrate Jubilee didn’t change. And, regardless of Israel’s faithfulness (or lack thereof), God remains faithful and good, despite their disobedience. God will usher in Jubilee. The land is destroyed, yet God is at work to transform hardship into beauty. This doesn’t negate the hardship or grief but redeems it into something beautiful. This does not mean God caused hardship but that God is able to take even the worst situations and bring something good out. As resurrection people, we also believe that God will ultimately take the worst parts of life even death—and transform them into life. God is good despite the circumstances. The text talks about God’s faithfulness in spite of the unfaithfulness of the people of God. Despite the people putting themselves in such a dire situation, God is still working for their good. Working together with God brings about good news for the poor. It brings about joy instead of mourning. We can see in the world in very real ways. When families are freed from cycles of abuse, we see joy. When hungry people are fed, we see joy. When those who mourn know they are not alone in their grief, there is joy. We are called to be joy bringers in the world. Joining the mission of God in the world shares hope and joy with a world that is often hopeless and filled with despair. Hopeless-seeming situations are not hopeless for the people of God. Despair can turn to joy.

In the midst of our despair, God is at work. In the midst of our pain, God is at work. Even in the midst of our sin, we are not abandoned. In a world that seeks to cover up pain with tinsel and lights, God seeks to transform pain into glory. God seeks to have life grow from ashes.

Trust, during this Advent season, that Christ came to bring about the kingdom of God in our world, and we have hope that Christ will come again to make all things right. We know the year of the Lord came with Jesus, and is coming to fulfillment when he returns. We can have joy in that. We can look for the places that God is already at work, turning ashes into beauty.

But this work of joy in the world is not one we simply watch and wait for it’s one we participate in bringing about. Just like the call to Jubilee remained for the Israelites, so too remains our call to join the mission of God in the world. We have the opportunity to be present with those who mourn, to bring light into darkness, to do the work of justice in our world, to live in righteous ways, that others might also see and know the joy of the Lord.

This is good news for us today. There is unspeakable joy despite our circumstances. But it is good news for the world too. So may we go into the world as bearers of joy, as rebuilders who care for our world; that we might share the good news of great joy that is for all people today, tomorrow, and in the dark days to come.