

Reason to Rejoice

A Sermon for Advent based on Isaiah 61:1-11

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Winters are hard in Britton, South Dakota, where my wife and I lived before moving to Pittsburgh. We knew it was so when we moved, but that first winter it didn't seem so hard or even difficult even though it got down to the minus 20s several times that year. It was just all so new and exciting that it didn't seem to bother us. But by three years later, Cheryl and I had joined the ranks of complainers. Winter—in Britton and in plenty of other places—is, for many of us, just plain miserable. It drags you down and steals your joy. In Isaiah 61, the prophet finds himself in such a joyless season in Israelite history. Yet somehow Isaiah also finds something to be hopeful about.

The Hebrew people have finally been able to return to their home country of Judah, which they had been desperate to do for 70 years. But when they return to Jerusalem, they see that their city has been laid in ruins and its streets left desolate by the destruction of the Babylonian army. Even the Temple, where they believed God resided and which earlier stood in glory, had been completely destroyed. The people's hope in returning to their homeland was to rebuild their ruined city, but they found that the devastation was too enormous and that their rebuilding project went too slowly. Things hadn't gone as expected.

They returnees realized that there was no way for them to rebuild and restore their city to its prior glory. They couldn't help but mourn and be disheartened by the whole situation. A feeling of hopelessness surrounded Isaiah. For me, modern-day images of this level of destruction come to mind, such as the aerial footage showing the devastation of Homs in Syria—devastation that leads to extreme hopelessness. The buildings and houses of Homs were turned to rubble due to the civil war that began raging in Syria in 2011. The whole city looked like the aftermath of the apocalypse. Similar images have come from Haiti and some of the southern neighborhoods that were hit by Hurricane Matthew. As in those areas, the destruction and loss in the Jerusalem of Isaiah's time were so devastating as to make the city seem impossible to rebuild.

Many of us can only imagine what it's like to live in places where war and violence continue to claim people's lives every day, or to experience natural disasters over and over again. But even those of us living in cities and towns that don't experience such dramatic devastation can't deny the fact that there are people within our communities and around our country who feel rejected and shattered by awful experiences. Our towns may not look like Homs in Syria, but the hollowness that comes from the loss of hope is, for some, felt on the inside nonetheless. Due to poverty, some people find it difficult to pay their bills and feed their families despite working long, seemingly endless hours. Due to loneliness, some people feel rejected and unloved. Due to illness and the loss of a loved one, some people feel distant from God and from other people. Due to greed and unjust systems, some people continue to suffer oppression, their rights to live freely as God's beloved children having been denied.

In the face of such atrocities and hardship, how can we find hope and joy in life? How can we be optimistic about the future of our children, our grandchildren, and the generations to come?

In the midst of Jerusalem's hollow city streets, Isaiah shouts these words:

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; . . . 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 shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah was proclaiming that ruined Jerusalem and the many places left to ruin will be restored one day; the poor, the mourners, the brokenhearted, and the captives will be renewed, and they will be anointed with gladness and joy.

I'm not sure what the people's reaction to this proclamation of good news was, since they were surrounded by such ugliness and destruction. How could they hope and rejoice when all the external cues seemed to suggest they do the opposite?

If not for our God and Creator, we have no ability to hope. Only by the strength of God are we able to find a reason to rejoice in the face of dire destruction and need. God created the whole world—and called it good. God stood by the aging yet hopeful Abraham. God freed his people from slavery. God wandered with his people in the wilderness. God provided for a poor widow and her son. God called prophets—ordinary people—to speak God's word. God has *always* stood with and for God's people in their struggles, even when those people—when we!—turn away from God. This is the God who gives us hope and reason to rejoice.

With God, who never leaves us, we know that, as depressing, gloomy, and long winter might be, spring will eventually come. The darkness will not last. Death and sin do not get the last word. So no matter how hollow, how empty we might feel, we know it will not last. We may not be able to imagine how the city of Homs or the country of Haiti might be rebuilt—or even *whether* they will be rebuilt—but we know God is always working for the good of God's people. As Isaiah declares, "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." You see, the promise of a Savior who comes in the form of a tiny baby on Christmas doesn't come to our joyful Christmas gatherings. While God is certainly there in those places, salvation comes to the darkest, most desperate of situations to shine the Light of hope.

So let us share our hope with our brothers and sisters, suffering from the destruction and devastation wrought by wars and natural disasters. Let us in hope heed our Christian call to look beyond what we see and feel by fighting for a better world, even when it seems impossible. For when we show hope in God, we are able to look through the suffering of this world to find the glory of God on the other side.

Brothers and sisters, know that no matter how hopeless a situation might look, we have reason to hope and rejoice, because God has promised to deliver us all from the power of evil that continues to suppress God's children. God has promised to deliver us from all the pain we endure. God has promised to renew us and to clothe us with God's righteousness and salvation. And more than knowing these truths, live into them. Fight for a world in which everyone is treated with dignity and respect, even when it seems impossible, and live like sadness and pain will not last, for God's promises are sure and true. Friends, this is our reason to rejoice as we await the coming of the Lord this day and in all days. Hallelujah! Amen.