



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, DECEMBER 17, 2023

ISAIAH 61:14, 8-11; PSALM 126; 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24; JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

REFUGEES, RESTORATION, AND REJOICING

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 *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 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 ruins, 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 a garland, and 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.*

Imagine, if you will, a long procession of refugees walking along a desert highway, war-weary, haggard, with no possessions but what they have with them. Hunger and thirst churn their thoughts of a meager meal as the sand blows in their tearful eyes. Exhaustion

weighs down their slogged steps. Grief sticks in their scratchy throats grown hoarse from crying.

Their kids in tow have no memory of the former place known as home; even the adults have sepia-clouded memories of the former

place, faded with the expanse of time and the haunts of devastation that intervened since they were forced from their homes which no longer stand. But soon they will be told to return. Return to what, you might ask?

You may think I am describing refugees from the Gaza war; the images could certainly match much of what we've seen in recent weeks. I suppose these could be any of the 140 million refugees currently displaced across the globe, all seeking to return "home" whatever that word might mean for Syrians or Rohingyans or Sudanese or Venezuelans, or...or...or...ⁱ

But I am actually describing a group of people who lived 2500 years ago, forced into exile from their home which was destroyed, only to be told years later to return. That the description seems apt even today should tell us something of the human condition that continues to haunt and do harm to one another, often in the name of vengeful justice or religious righteousness or even in the name of God, but always, always, befouled by some poison of hatred that justifies the suffering. Are we really any different?



No, the people about whom I am speaking had been hauled off from their homes that lay just a few miles from present-day Gaza, forced into exile in Babylon after the imperial force laid waste their cities in Judea, their homes, even their house of prayer. They left piles of rubble behind them, and a life's worth of possessions they could not salvage.

"By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept," laments the psalmist (Ps. 137). Their music-making ceased because there was no mirth in

their souls about which to sing.

But then a crusty prophet comes along and stands on a stump to remind them that God has not forgotten nor forsaken them. His face is rugous and dark-baked from the desert sun, but his voice is full-throated and fiercely confident that God is up to something with them.

Last week we heard Isaiah tell them that God directed the hosts of heaven to comfort, comfort my people. These angelic creatures who sing the eternal praise song of joy to God—holy, holy holy, Lord...--they are given a particular charge to serve these weary

people. Comfort, comfort them. My people. The word is significant—comfort is more than consoling, more than reassuring. Comfort means to fortify them, strengthen them, for the journey about to ensue. There is a sinewy hope unfolding before them, and desert roads once used by the ranks of military might will be run smooth and made straight for God's work at hand.

They are dubious at first, understandably so since their dynamics of worldly power haven't seemed to change much. But then the Babylonians are overthrown by the Persians, and King Cyrus, whom Isaiah actually calls God's anointed one, (the only non-Jew to be named such in the Bible), decides that he will allow the exiled refugees to return home, and he will help pay for their restoration of their cities. Even their temple will be rebuilt from the coffers of the imperial government. Could it be that with God all things really are possible?

And so in today's passage from Isaiah, the people having returned home to Judea, hear the prophet's declaration of good news for them, cause to rejoice because God has designs for the restoration and seems willing to use unconventional means to see it realized.

At the heart of this good news is the proclamation of jubilee, a time of intentional healing of broken relationships, a time of release from usurious economic burdens no longer justified in the divine realm now envisioned, a time of healing the broken-hearted, a time of comforting all who mourn, a time to proclaim liberty to the captives, a time to build upon the ancient ruins, to raise up the former devastations, to repair the ruined cities.

It shall be the project of God, and God's people are called into it as well, so put on your garlands of delight, the prophet says, feel the oil of gladness seep into your pores, don your mantle of praise, and pick up your instruments once more.

This is the day the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.

Yes, the theme for today is to rejoice. I don't know about you, but I'm struggling this year to rejoice with abandon.

And I belabor this story of refugees from 2500 years ago, not as an historical exercise, but because I believe with all my heart that God is in the midst of the rubble even today, and is calling us into the work of restoration and peace. God is seeking comfort for beloved ones who are oppressed and devastated and held prisoner to the ways of war that all too

often corrupt and destroy the creatures of God.

My friends, in October the United States government (our government) sent \$14 billion to the State of Israel for military weapons. Since 1946, the total aid sent to Israel exceeds \$400 billion. If we can send \$14 billion for military in short order, it seems that we could send \$14 billion to serve the cause of restoration and peace. I'm just saying...

How ever you may choose to parse the current conflict, and for the record I believe there is not a soul in the Holy Land who has been spared the grief, nor is there a soul in the Holy Land beyond the bounds of being claimed as part of God's people...

How ever you may choose to parse the current conflict, God is saying comfort,

comfort my people. Strengthen them for a journey on God's highway that traverses the desert desolation of war and death to return home to the city of peace which God has envisioned as the dwelling place for all of us.

It is time that we proclaim the jubilee of God and find our places in joining the heavenly chorus to sing our praises with joyful hope that God will use unconventional means to accomplish this promised vision. God will use us to accomplish that vision.

It takes fierce courage to embrace a sinewy hope in such times, but the prophet is speaking to us here today, friends, and we do not get a pass. So put on your garment of salvation and rejoice that God is stirring in our midst.

Prepare the way of the Lord. Come Emmanuel, come.

¹ The photo is of Syrian refugees,
<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/numbers-syrian-refugees-around-world/>