



Sunday's Sermon

Pastor Lara Forbes



Growing Together in Christ to Love and Serve All People

Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Grace to you and peace from God, our creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

I mentioned at the beginning of worship that we're over halfway through the season of Advent. The third Sunday of Advent is often called "Rejoice!" Sunday. The tradition of this day goes back to when the season of Advent was longer and primarily a penitential season leading up to the Festival of Christmas. When the focus was on penitence, Rejoice Sunday was a welcome transition leading into the festival.

For us today, it's a Sunday that celebrates the transformative power of joy that can only come from God.

Over these last few weeks, we've heard readings from the prophet Isaiah and the promises God made to the Israelites at different times in their history. The first takes place when the return from exile was well underway, and it was a lament and cry for God to come down and fix it all *now*.

The second reading we heard was words of pure comfort and promise that were spoken at the beginning of the exile itself. And the reading we hear today takes place at the beginning of the *return* from exile. The Israelites have gotten their first glimpse of what was left of Jerusalem and Temple - which was basically nothing. Even the wall around the city was gone.

And it's into that situation that the prophet speaks the words we hear today. And they're more than words that tell the people everything's going to be okay.

This is a prophecy of strength that calls the Israelites into who they will become. In this prophecy, the Spirit of God promises to transform the Israelites' grief and mourning and sorrow into joy. Not the kind of joy that snaps its fingers and makes everything better in an instant, but the kind that takes root and builds up over time.

The joy that would sustain them in even the toughest of times. The joy that would transform them from a physical posture of being hunched over with their heads down to one that allows them to stand tall.

And more than that, in this prophecy God makes an everlasting covenant with them; so this promise of joy isn't only for the current generation, but for future ones, too. And this promise is so powerful that it will restore the glory of Israel and make it known the world over.

Like the other promises we've heard this season, this one assured the Israelites that they were still God's people and it called them forward *despite* the hardship they were facing. It gave them the confidence they needed to keep putting one foot in front of the other and the strength to rebuild.

And because of who God is, they knew they would receive this joy because God had promised it. And it took decades, and it wasn't always easy, but they did rebuild and continue to be God's people. God's promise of joy to them was fulfilled.

¹We know that sometimes it's hard to find joy. Especially this year. For a lot of people 2020 has been a year that took joy away. Canceled vacations, no social gatherings, anxiety and worry, missed opportunities with family and friends. Where's the joy in that, right?

And again, this year especially, that loss can be compounded by the season we're in and the sacrifices we're being asked to make by not gathering in order to keep everyone safe. It's easy to get consumed by everything that has been taken away, or taken over, by the pandemic and to lose sight of the joy that God promises us.

But the joy God promises us doesn't automatically take away the losses we're feeling. It pushes back against them, takes root in us, and gives us the strength and courage to keep moving forward in spite of what's going on in the world.

The summer between my first and second year of seminary, I drove from Seattle to Chicago because I needed to get my car there. As I approached the city, traffic was of course heavy, and there was one point when it had come to a complete stop. And because it was summer, I had the windows up and the air-conditioning on. And I had the radio turned up so I could hear it above the a/c.

But above *that* I heard a constant, high-pitched hum. And I couldn't figure out what it was, so I turned off the a/c and turned down the radio. And as I listened, I remembered that that summer was the year of the 17-year cicadas. A time when millions of cicadas hatch after being underground for 17 years. And that's what I was hearing that day.

If you've been in a place when they hatch en masse like that, you know that there are so many of them and they are so loud that their noise takes over and drowns out everything else.

And I think that's what this year has felt like for a lot of people.

When we think about everything that's happened this year - the deaths in our congregation, the deaths worldwide, the loss of routine, violence, racism and political divisions, all of the life-draining stuff - it's easy to let it drown out everything else. And to forget about whatever good has happened.

But even in a year like 2020, God promises us joy. Genuine joy. Not the kind that will happen in an instant, but the kind that takes root and builds up. The joy that sustains us in even the toughest of times, giving us the strength and courage to face whatever is happening and keep moving forward in spite of it.

It's the joy we feel when people come together and begin again to work toward systemic and racial justice. It's the joy we feel when leaders and companies commit to finding sustainable fuel sources and ways for us to grow food.

It's the joy we feel when we celebrate the births of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, nieces and nephews. It's the joy we feel when *are* able to be together, even if we have to wear masks, and be outside and six feet apart. It's the joy we feel when we're able to see and interact with each other even on a Zoom call.

1 <https://gordponderings.blogspot.com/2020/12/looking-ahead-to-december-13-2020.html>

The chaos of everything in our society - pandemic, politics, economics, racism, etc. - all of that competes for our attention and tries to drown out the life-giving good news of God. But the joy God promises to us pushes back against all that.

The joy God promises is more than that we'll just be happy. It doesn't rely on everything going the way we want it to. The joy God promises is based on our being grounded in God's presence, in God's love, in God's activity in our lives. That's where it takes root. It builds up in us - and builds us up - and we're able to carry it with us wherever we go.

No matter how loud the rest of the world might get or how hard it tries to press down on us, the joy God promises to us gives us the strength and courage to face whatever is happening. Thanks be to God! Amen.