

In the Ruins, a Spirit of Rejoicing
December 17, 2017
Rev. Stephanie Ryder

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.

Luke 1:46-55:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

One of my favorite birthday cards said on the front, "Wow, just what I always wanted!" with a cartoon of the Dalai Lama opening a present amidst some smiling

monks. and the words, The inside message: “Nothing!” *Just what I always wanted: nothing!*

The message is counterintuitive to our culture, and particularly this season of shopping, heavy bags and boxes, wrapping and sending, fullness and over-abundance. We rarely want nothing, even if it is not material things we seek. We may want a certain political outcome, or for the road construction to end on our street; I know many of us as parents say all we really want is for our children to get along and be friends, or we may, don't we, want an end to hunger and world peace? Yes?

Last week the Old Testament reading was from 2nd or Deuter-Isaiah, believed to be written during the time of Israelite exile in Babylon. This week, the Isaiah reading is from 3rd or Trito-Isaiah, written likely during the aftermath of exile, the beginning of the Israelite return to Zion in 538 BCE; the anticipation of restoration ahead of them.

It likely seemed daunting and overwhelming. Remember when, after having been freed from slavery in Egypt and wandering and hungry in the desert wilderness, the Israelites longed to be back in Egypt as slaves, rather than hungry and thirsty and forlorn in the desert? When they were slaves, they wanted freedom, when they were free, they wanted to go back home. The wilderness was unfamiliar and scary; at least in slavery they knew what to expect.

The generation of exiled Israelites in Babylon had made a life there, and returning home to a destroyed temple and shattered monarchy made them think twice about what they really wanted and what, exactly, was freedom. I think about those who have cared for loved ones with dementia, who claim after the death, “It's for the best, really; there was no quality of life left.” And though that's perhaps true, there may still be a longing for that life afterwards. Even if it was not a good quality of life at least it was a life.

The passage begins by the prophet being sent on a mission to proclaim the good news to the people returning from exile. These beginning verses are also the lines that Jesus quotes as he begins his public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, anointing me to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted and proclaim freedom from the captives and release of darkness and the year of the Lord's favor; to provide comfort to all who mourn and grieve and a crown of beauty instead of ashes.”

The reference to ashes of course reminds me of the ashes we are experiencing in California this fall. A student at UC Santa Barbara told me how they were all given masks to wear last week while the fires raged. He didn't think much of it until he woke up one day and everything was dark and it looked like frost all over the ground, but it was ash. School was then cancelled and students were told their finals would be postponed until after the holiday break. This was not good news to the student, who was hoping to spend his break relaxing, not anticipating his final

exams. And yet he knows this is not really such a hardship, compared to those who have lost their homes and businesses and schools.

The passage focuses on those who live in darkness, who mourn and grieve. There have been interviews this week with the parents of first-graders killed at Sandy Hook five years ago. One mom said her older child is now 13 but her child killed that day will forever remain 6 years old. I think about my friend, Steve, who lost his only child, a son, age 19, to an overdose just under two years ago. He sees the kids coming home from college and his will never come home. Ever again. A crushing grief imposes a weight unbearable to those of us who have suffered such deep losses.

I happened upon a short story called "The Greatest Gift," by Philip Van Doren Stern written in 1939 and was the basis for the classic holiday movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The story begins, "The little town straggling up the hill was bright with colored Christmas lights, but George Pratt (Bailey in the movie) did not see them." The man leans over the railing of the iron bridge, staring moodily at the black water, wishing he had never been born. His business is in a financial crisis and when he asks for a loan and offers his life insurance policy as collateral, he is told he is worth more dead than alive. Thus, he decides the world, or at least his family and the town whom he serves, is better off without him.

Our New Testament passage, from the gospel of Luke, highlights Mary, who has just discovered she is pregnant. Prior to the passage, this discovery was not good news, when a stranger came to tell her she was going to be soon with child. She was frightened and surely feared for her life, as she was engaged but not yet married. The passage is known as Mary's Song of Praise, or the Magnificat, and is compared to Hannah's prayer from 1 Samuel; Hannah had been deeply distressed because her womb had been closed and she was unable to conceive a child.

Mary's song also resembles the Isaiah passage today. The second part of the Isaiah passage claims that Israel's descendants will be acknowledged as a people whom the Lord has blessed. Similarly, Mary claims in her song that from now on all generations will call her blessed. The Isaiah author says, "I will rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God," and Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Why are they blessed? Why are they rejoicing? The Israelites have returned to destruction and ruins and Mary is engaged and pregnant by whom she knows not.

A third reading proscribed for today is 1 Thessalonians 5, where Paul writes from prison to the church at Thessalonica, *Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit*. It seems that the passages speak about this Spirit. This Spirit that allows rejoicing in all circumstances.

Rejoicing is different than being happy. Happiness is dependent upon outside circumstances, and is fleeting. Joy, on the other hand, is found in the Lord, and is the gift of God's presence. Joy transcends circumstances. Theologian Frederick Buechner says, "Happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to – a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it."

Mary, very literally, has God within her. Isaiah and Mary and Paul rejoice because of the promise of God -- the covenant that God will not leave God's people forlorn, abandoned and alone. They trust the promise, and so can we.

In the recent book, *The Book of Joy*, spiritual masters and moral leaders, the Dalai Lama (the one on the card who says "Just what I always wanted: nothing!") and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, share hard their wisdom of how to live with joy in the face of life's sorrows, and how to transform joy from an ephemeral state to an enduring trait, from a fleeting feeling to a lasting way of being.

They respond to the questions: Is it really possible to be joyful even in the face of our daily troubles – from morning traffic to fears of not providing for our families, from anger at those who wronged us to grief at the loss of those we love, from the ravages of illness to the abyss of death? And the most popular question: how do we live in joy when so many are suffering?

Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama envision and explore 8 pillars of joy, 4 that come from the mind, and 4 from the heart: perspective, humility, humor and acceptance; and forgiveness, gratitude, compassion and generosity. Perhaps when we embody these principles, these pillars, God's justice is made manifest.

The Dalai Lama shares how the way through sadness and grief that comes from deep loss is to use it as motivation and to generate a deeper sense of purpose. With great loss, you can live a more meaningful life, he says.

This is what we see in the story *The Greatest Gift*, and the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, where the angel Clarence is sent to be with George as he contemplates suicide overlooking the river, and Clarence jumps in instead, so that George is inspired to be the one who saves. They save one another. Clarence then takes George on a journey of what his life would be like if he hadn't been born, and George realizes the many people he has touched in his life and how their lives, too would be impacted if he hadn't been born.

Some of the parents of the children killed at Sandy Hook started an organization the month after the shooting called Sandy Hook Promise. Based in Newtown, Connecticut, the intent is to honor all victims of gun violence by building a

national movement of people engaged to deliver gun violence prevention programs and mobilize the passage of sensible state and national policy. One parent said, in five years from now, she hopes she doesn't have to hear about more shootings and that no other parent will have to experience the senseless, horrific loss of their child from gun violence.

A year after my friend's son died from an overdose, his landlord, a single mother, became ill and Steve and his wife became the guardians of their landlord's daughter, the same age as their son who had died. The girl's mother passed away on Thanksgiving and Steve and Susan now have a daughter. And a puppy, who brings them great happiness and joy.

Joy can be cultivated, says the Dalai Lama, not by focusing on our own suffering and our separation from others, but by focusing our attention on the suffering outside of ourselves and our indivisible connection to others. Joy allows us to face suffering that ennobles rather than embitters, to bear hardship without becoming hard and heartbreak without being broken. Suffering is inevitable but how we respond to it is a choice.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, the prophet says, to give those who mourn an 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.

Difficulties can lead us to have great inner strength. The Dalai Lama has lived in exile for 58 years, having escaped to India when China invaded Tibet in 1950. He says about those in exile, "We lost our own country and became refugees, but that same experience gave us new opportunities to see more things, to meet with different people, different spiritual practitioners and scientists." He says that he actually prefers his life as a refugee, because he has been liberated from the prison of formality; he is that much closer to reality. And like the card said, perhaps that much closer to wanting nothing.

The Advent promise of Christ is that the light will eventually shine in the darkness. Like the exiles coming back from Babylon to their destroyed Jerusalem and the evacuees returning to Sonoma and Santa Barbara to their city of ashes, God will help them rebuild and repair. And for the families of the victims of gun violence or the opioid crisis, God is a God of justice and justice will eventually prevail.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.