



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 Dec. 17, 2023
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "Love is Born of Joy"

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (NRSV)

61:1 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;

61:2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

61:3 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.

61:4 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.

61:8 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.

61:9 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.

61:10 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.

61:11 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.

“Love is Born of Joy”

Already, and not yet.

Advent is the season of the already, and the not yet.

It happened in a flash. It was 7:00 in the morning. I had just finished an early morning bike ride. I was walking in the door, only to catch my 8-year-old son, tearing down the hall in pajamas, straight toward the room of his 3-year-old sister, who apparently had just woken up, and was crying for mom. “Mommy, Mommy!” (By the way, she never calls for me in the morning. I try not to take that personally.) As she’s calling, “Mommy, Mommy!” my 8-year-old running toward her room, a mischievous grin upon his face, I hear my spouse call after him. “Don’t scare your sister.” “I won’t!” he calls back, in a voice clearly indicating he means to scare his sister. Taking the scene in all at once, trying to provide whatever backup I can, I call after my son, “Be nice!” To which he responds, “I am nice!” Right before he bursts into his sister’s room, yelling, “I’m going to eat you up!” And she goes ballistic.

As we are trying to calm her down, I think about that ingenious turn of phrase my son has just enacted. “Be nice!” “I am nice.” He is already nice kid, objectively, ontologically, in his very being. But that’s not what I was talking about in that moment, when I was asking him to *be* nice. I was asking him to act in accordance with who he is. Be nice as you are nice. A request he choose not honor on Wednesday morning. Already and not yet.

My thoughts immediately went to a discussion that I had here, in our anti-racism book group at Westminster Presbyterian Church over the fall. It was the very last class of our series. I was trying to provide the class with a faith perspective on our work of deconstructing systemic racism, so I had the class read together parts of the Confession of Belhar, an important confession of the Presbyterian Church (USA).¹ The section reads as follows:

We believe

- *that God...wishes to bring about justice and true peace among people;*
- *that...God brings justice to the oppressed and gives bread to the hungry;*
- *that God frees the prisoner and restores sight to the blind;*
- *that God supports the downtrodden, protects the stranger, [and] helps orphans and widows*

¹ The Belhar Confession.

https://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/the_belhar_confession-rogers.pdf

As we read those lines, a very good objection was raised by the class. If we believe God does this, why are there still prisoners? Why are there still the downtrodden, without support? Widows and orphans without any help?

Turn on the news, you see it every night. Widows and orphans, their homes bombed, nowhere to flee in Gaza. Other women turned into widows and other children turned into orphans, on a horrifying day in Israel this past October.

Visit any prison. The United States has the second highest prison population in the world, 1.68 million, second only to China.

Visit the border, thousands of asylum seekers, from war torn, gang torn, corruption torn, colonialism torn countries arrive every day.

The creed says, *We believe God frees the prisoner [and] supports the downtrodden.*

How do we say those words? How do we believe those words? What goes through your mind, when you read those words on a Sunday?

The classic Advent theme is, ‘already, but not yet.’ We proclaim a God of freedom, here and now, but, in many cases, that freedom is ‘not yet’ realized. Some days, the ‘not yet’ seems quite apparent.

The people in Isaiah’s day could have said the same, when he said:

God 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.

By the time we get to chapter 61 of the book of Isaiah, the Babylonian exile is coming to an end. You’ll remember late in the 6th Century BC, the empire of Babylon decimated Jerusalem, destroyed its temple, uprooted the people, exiling them to another land.

That exile lasted a generation, but then another empire rose to power and the Israelites were allowed to return home. When Isaiah says, *God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted*, he is referring to the people returning to a devastated home.

The curious thing is that in the midst of these devastations, Isaiah proclaimed good news:

Arise, shine; for your light has come. Isaiah, ch. 60

And it's not just good news for the people as a whole. It's especially good news for those most pushed to the margins of that community.

Chapter 56: *Even the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful.*

And in our Scripture today: *For I the Lord love justice.*

God is not simply bringing the people back to the status quo, to what was before exile. Isaiah's vision is of a whole community reorientation. Where those most pushed aside are brought to the center.

Chapter 58: *You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*

The people of Isaiah's day had every reason to despair, and even more, every reason to turn on one another, to blame one another, to look around, and see nothing but scarcity, and therefore to fight with one another because I better get mine before you get yours.

And in the midst of all that, Isaiah proclaims hope, justice. And even more than that, joy:

v. 10 of our Scripture today: *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God.*

In the Hebrew, there's a grammatical device that is lost to the English.² The verb for 'rejoice' is doubled. It's more like, "I will have joy, and even more joy, in the Lord." It is a proclamation of exuberance, in the midst of devastation.

But like our class, who questioned the words of the Creed of Belhar, the people of Isaiah's time might well have brought his words into question. How do you feel joy, in the midst of devastation? How do you proclaim release, while not

² See Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah Vol. 2: 40-66*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 218.

discounting real pain? Isaiah holds those two in tension, and asks us to do the same. How do you do that?

This past week, the daily devotions from Richard Rohr's Center of Action and Contemplation posted an excerpt from an American poet with Palestinian heritage named Naomi Shihab Nye.³

In the excerpt, Nye tells of a chance meeting at an airport gate. Security paged on the intercom asking for anyone who spoke Arabic.

It turns out that that was her gate, and she spoke a bit of Arabic.

What she found at the gate was an older Palestinian woman who had collapsed weeping on the floor. This woman didn't speak English, so Nye, in broken Arabic, spoke to her. The minute the woman heard a language she understood, her body immediately relaxed. She was in route to El Paso for an urgent medical procedure and had thought that her flight was canceled. Nye explained to her it was only delayed.

Then the poet called the woman's son, who was picking her up, explaining what had happened. And then, unexpectedly, Nye called her father, and the woman and Nye's father spoke to each other in fluent Arabic for some time. It turns out they had about 10 mutual friends.

By this time, the mood had turned. In her excitement, and in her relief, the woman opened her bag. She started passing out cookies to everyone in the gate. Because of the long delay, the airline broke out drinks for those waiting. It all turned into a bit of celebration at the end.

Nye ends the passage with these words,

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate...seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies...This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.

³ Naomi Shihab Nye, "Kindness at Gate A-4." December 14, 2023. Center for Action and Contemplation. <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/kindness-at-gate-a-4/>

Not everything is lost.

In the midst of these devastations, near and far, remember, she says, not everything is lost. When everything seems lost, remember, not everything is lost.

There's these moments of the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. Somedays you've got to look hard to see them; You've really got to look hard, to see God at the airport gate.

But when you witness them, what you are seeing is the 'already,' of the classic Advent theme of 'already, but not yet.' Already, God and the people of God are at work: freeing, proclaiming, enacting good news. Liberty to the captives. Release to the prisoners. It's there, but sometimes it takes the eyes of faith to see. Not everything is lost.

It takes faith to see, because, also, 'not yet.' God's kingdom breaks through but it is not yet fully here. For every beautiful story of good news, there are more stories of devastation. So 'not yet,' – 'not yet' for so many broken and brokenhearted.

In the in-between time, we wait for God's good future.
In this space of already, and not yet, this is what we do:

We believe;

And we proclaim: A God who is in solidarity especially with those most push aside: The captive, the prisoner, the refugee. The God of peace with the orphans and widows, near and far.

We proclaim that God.

And with that God, we work.

We work to see those most pushed aside in the way God sees them: as beloved children of God.

So, when you're sitting around the table, or the living room, or the bar at a company party in the weeks ahead, and someone starts talking about war, or refugees, or college protests, or poverty, or *you name the issue* – we strive to remember that underneath all the noise, all the campaign slogans, all the shouting matches across tables, we're talking about people, God's beloved people.

And also, we work to see the person who we want just to stop and shake, because how could they be so wrong, we work to see them as one of God's beloved people too.

And also (and also) we work to see ourselves, ourselves, the ones we are often the hardest upon, especially on long, cold, exhausted, winter nights. We work to see the person in the mirror as God's beloved child too.

When you look around, and you see:
there are no longer any more enemies,
because everyone belongs at the table.

When you see that, you join the God of liberation in the work of our lives.

And in that we find joy.
We find the joy in this season. Amen.