



Sunday, December 13, 2020

Rev. Robert W. Brown

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

**Advent 3 – JOY**

**Star-gazing**

## INTRODUCTION:

As we continue our Advent journey this year, we have found ourselves in a historic time between memory and hope. We remember back just 9 months ago when life was “normal”. Remember when we gathered freely, without a care, in our small groups (I was reminded this week that our Advent theme for last year was JOY.) We joyously gathered for Sunday Worship, lit candles, sang with the choir. A year ago, friends and family would celebrate holidays, birthdays, weddings and graduations together.

This Advent, we remember what was. And here we are today, this third week in Advent 2020, still holding on to a very real hope that we know is coming. Even now, the vaccines are rolling out of the warehouses and being successfully administered.

There is a new dawn for the world.

And so, we wait in eager anticipation, remembering what was and hoping for what lies ahead. This *is* the Advent journey we celebrate year after year. God *is* on the move and Christ *is* coming. Advent is a short season. It doesn't ask much of us in the way of spiritual endurance. Lent is SIX weeks long! Even still, if you embrace these four weeks of waiting, yearning and hoping for God's rebirth in our heart; if you accept its dark climate, Advent becomes a seriously sobering invitation to change your mind to turn your life in a different direction. Advent invites us to watch carefully and wait patiently for the promised dawn to appear. As short as the four weeks of Advent are, it can be emotionally exhausting. I think that's why our third week introduces us to a splash of pink. In the monochrome wildernesses of this season, the pink candle of JOY begins to celebrate what we know is just around the corner.; the promised dawn is breaking.

And so today's scripture reading reaffirms that promise. It's a burst of hope from the prophet Isaiah who foresees the day when the brokenhearted will find healing, when captives will find liberation and good news will be proclaimed to the poor. The coming of Jesus brings comfort to all who mourn.

Fear not! Between memory and hope, we can even now let the Joy of the Lord be our strength.

It was the theologian Karl Barth who said that we should “preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” I think that Barth was suggesting that we should approach the truth of Scripture through a lens of cultural relevance. How do these words penetrate into our world today?

As you listen to these words from the Prophet Isaiah, consider the full spectrum of your current condition, consider the state of our nation, consider the state of our world... God says, there will be beauty for ashes, an oil of joy for mourning.

### SCRIPTURE READING Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,<sup>[a]</sup>  
<sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor  
and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
<sup>3</sup> and provide for those who grieve in Zion—  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy  
instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
instead of a spirit of despair.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
a planting of the Lord  
for the display of his splendor.  
<sup>4</sup> They will rebuild the ancient ruins  
and restore the places long devastated;  
they will renew the ruined cities  
that have been devastated for generations.  
“For I, the Lord, love justice;  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.  
In my faithfulness I will reward my people  
and make an everlasting covenant with them.  
<sup>9</sup> Their descendants will be known among the nations  
and their offspring among the peoples.

All who see them will acknowledge  
that they are a people the Lord has blessed.”

<sup>10</sup> I delight greatly in the Lord;  
my soul rejoices in my God.  
For GOD has clothed me with garments of salvation  
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

<sup>11</sup> For as the soil makes the sprout come up  
and a garden causes seeds to grow,  
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness  
and praise spring up before all nations.

## SERMON

Please join me in prayer...

*Holy holy holy God,  
God of TIME and SPACE  
God of the very space between each molecule  
and stretching out to the very ends of the COSMOS,  
Every created thing bears witness to your Grace and Glory,  
all because you slipped through the boundaries of time and space  
to become like us;  
fragile, vulnerable, mortal.*

*So, in THIS time, in THIS space we sit at your feet in AWE and WONDER, preparing once again  
to enter in to this ancient and mystical story.*

*And as we are filled with hopeful expectations at your coming, may we also be filled with the  
comforting radiance of your presence here with us this morning.  
Do not let us go, until we have been changed.*

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable  
to you, our ROCK and our Redeemer. – AMEN*

I think for me, star-gazing is perhaps the most awesome experience of communing with God. No matter what was happening in the melodrama of my life, I could always lie back in the cool of the evening and see a wider picture; the antient, constantly evolving motion of a incomprehensible cosmos, dancing in full view before my eyes. There in the darkness of night, I see the breadth of creation and consider the vapor of one little life. It is then when I notice my breath and recognize the same organizing principle that hurled this vast creation into this incredible choreography is also the one that breathed life into me, and you. In the

vastness of all creation. You are critically important. Every breath you take, every beat of your heart matters in the grand tapestry.

“So, get on with it!” The Spirit whispers. I pick myself up in awed humility mixed with an odd sense of purpose. I may not be much in the grand mastery of eternity, but somehow it matters.

It reminds me of the rabbinic story that suggest that every person should have two pockets with a scrap of paper in each. One scrap should read, “I am but dust and ashes,” a line from the Book of Genesis, and the other should read, “For my sake was the world created,” a line from the Talmud. Whenever we feel too proud, the rabbis taught, we should read the first piece of paper; whenever we feel discouraged, we should read the second.

I imagine that most of us fall somewhere between these two pockets, sometimes we feel that joy of knowing that the world was created for my sake, other times it feels like we are as insignificant as dust and ashes. I agree that it is a good practice to move back and forth between the two pockets. And somehow the Joy of the Lord is most palpably experienced at that intersection of knowing both at the same time: the radical humility of “dust and ashes,” and the acceptance and love of self; of “the world was created for my sake.”

Between ashes and crowns we are able to recognize the tension between our singular condition and its integration with a larger whole. This is where we will actually witness beauty in the ashes and know the oil of joy even in mourning. Between memory and hope joy mingles with sorrow, gratitude weaves boldly into our disappointments. This is a joy deeper than happiness. This is the joy of the Lord who, from the very beginning, breathed life into all things, ensuring that each and every life was made in God’s image. The scriptures point to God’s promise of salvation and redemption. It is the Advent story of God’s coming, the joy of this season

Jesus is, for Christians, the fulfillment of God’s promise of our ultimate well-being. It is the ultimate story of healing that perennially restores nature and human nature in the harmonious wholeness of this vast cosmos. Joy to the world is always God’s original intent. To apprehend this joy is for your soul to feel it’s worth.

In about a week, you will be able to look to the western sky, just after dusk, and if the skies are clear, you will see an astrological phenomenon called, “the Christmas star.” On December 21, Jupiter and Saturn will align in a position known as a great conjunction, which is the point at which Jupiter and Saturn are closest to each other in the night sky as can be seen from Earth. A week from tomorrow, these two planets will be viewable from earth closer together than they have been since 1226! I think I’ll pray for clear skies and get out there under the vastness of God’s beauty, hope, peace, joy and love to remember once again that I am simply ashes and dust, beloved of God and fully alive to the joy of the Lord.

We may not be able to sing together this year, but the heavenly bodies will sing with us like choirs of angels, singing songs of promise, healing, hope and joy. This is the good news of the Gospel, Joy to the world! Our God is near!



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Astounding!

AMEN!