

December 17, 2023

3 Advent

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Christ Church, Exeter

### **The Road from Ruin to Joy**

Isaiah 61

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 broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
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.  
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.

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.  
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.  
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.  
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.

Luke 1:46-55

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; \*  
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.  
From this day all generations will call me blessed: \*

the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.  
 He has mercy on those who fear him \*  
 in every generation.  
 He has shown the strength of his arm, \*  
 he has scattered the proud in their conceit.  
 He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, \*  
 and has lifted up the lowly.  
 He has filled the hungry with good things, \*  
 and the rich he has sent away empty.  
 He has come to the help of his servant Israel, \*  
 for he has remembered his promise of mercy,  
 The promise he made to our fathers, \*  
 to Abraham and his children for ever.

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With Christmas Eve this year falling on a Sunday, we will only have one morning service at 8 a.m. next week because we have two big services later in the day. For some of you, then, this might be it for the Advent season. If so, the fourth candle we light on the wreath next week will represent LOVE. But today the candle is for JOY.

Never fear, there's still some more Advent work to do. The reading from Isaiah is set during a time long ago when the people of Israel were returning home to find much of what had been known destroyed and in ruin. They could have only wondered: how do we start again?

It is a universal and eternal question.

I want to talk to this morning about how we, people of faith, rebuild after loss and ruin. Before any joy can come in the morning, how do we work our way through the hours before dawn breaks and a new day begins?

The season of long nights is ripe for this work. Writer Jan Richardson suggests what we are to do during this time is to "Stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder. There will be time enough for running. For rushing. For worrying. For pushing. For now, stay. Wait. Something is on the horizon." (Jan L. Richardson, *Night Visions: Searching the Shadows of Advent and Christmas*)

A Quiz: What do some of these cities and towns have in common? -- Ocean City, Maryland. Atlantic City, New Jersey. Coney Island, New York. Cape May and Asbury Park, New Jersey. Hampton Beach, New Hampshire. They are all known for their boardwalks that would come alive in the summer months. We're talking amusement rides, mountains of saltwater taffy, carnival games, artery clogging fried food, and many grand hotels and casinos. They were places to go to see and be seen. Some continue to thrive, others have seen better days.

The seaside resort town Asbury Park was founded in the late 1800's. In its day musicians like Frank Sinatra and Duke Ellington would perform. The town was a center for rock music in the 1960s and 1970s. Then like Atlantic City to the north, it fell on hard times in the

1980's as drugs and crime took their toll. In 1987 it declared bankruptcy and the once thriving boardwalk and hotels were left to decay alongside the ocean.

One the town's favorite sons is the singer/songwriter Bruce Springsteen, who grew up nearby.

When it was time for Springsteen to release his first album 50 years ago (if you can believe) he named the album: Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J. Later successful and famous beyond his dreams, the singer returned in the early 2000's to the boardwalk after being away for many years. He saw and experienced what many of us would feel when returning to a place that once held memories of an almost an Eden of good times and prosperity -- then to find it barren and broken down. The population had declined, and the people left behind had to find a way forward through the devastation and adversity. The master songwriter wrote "My City of Ruins" as a tribute and a call to rebuild.

And then 9/11 happened. Lower Manhattan was crime scene. In the ashes of another beloved city, New York, the words of the song took on a whole new meaning. "My City in Ruins" became an anthem in the days and month after the terrorist attacks.

These are the images it paints.

The rain is falling down  
The church door's thrown open,  
But the congregation's gone

Young men on the corner, like scattered leaves  
The boarded up windows, the empty streets  
While my brother's down on his knees

My city of ruins  
Come on, rise up

And then the rocker turns inward:

Now, with these hands, with these hands  
I pray, Lord

I pray for the strength, Lord  
Yeah, I pray for the faith, Lord  
Pray for your love, Lord  
I pray for the strength, Lord

Again and again he sings.

Come on, rise up

I don't know how familiar Springsteen is with Isaiah 61? But he taps into its core meaning and message. After ruin there is a rising, with God's call and help.

Isaiah sings a song sung of those returning to a destroyed Jerusalem after generations of exile. We return to this event again and again for us to understand why the human spirit so longs to return.

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.

The Good News in Isaiah was echoed and claimed by Jesus in the Good News of salvation, relief, healing, release, comfort.

What God had in mind for them and for us is a holy swap. An exchange. A switching out of flowers for ashes, of praise for a faint spirit.

If God has God's way, the ruin and destruction we might ever experience in life is never the final chapter. Death is followed by rebirth. Dying is followed by rising.

Giving in and giving up is no option when a Kingdom and New Creation is being made.

God's promise and God's dream is always about return, restore and rebuild.

Who among us has not experienced the sense that all was lost – even for a moment? That there was no way back from near disaster? What the bell could not be un-rung? That the words that were spoken could cause so much harm and hurt – that they could never be taken back and that we could never be forgiven because what we did or said was, we thought, unforgivable.

It is like a child getting agitated if they made the wrong brush stroke on a painting they'd been working on for hours and then declare the whole thing was ruined and wants to tear it up in pieces.

Those who struggle with addiction know what it's like to wait and see if and when the house of cards collapses.

The Good News is that the storm does not last forever.

The prodigal son is the poster child for ruin that can give way to joy. What a mess he made of his life! Turning his back on his father, taking an early cash out of his inheritance, moving far away, and wasting it all. Only when he hit rock bottom did he ever consider returning home -- wondering if it was too late and whether there would be any home to return to. And there he was greeted by an old man, his father, who did what old men never did in

ancient days: run. The father ran to his lost son and embraced him and welcomed him home and called for a feast. The story of his life did not with ruin after all.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, adds her voice to this day – speaking through the generations in her words in the Magnificat. Her own life as a young woman with an uninvited and surprising announcement from God could have ended there – an epic scandal in a small backwater town. But in many ways it began then and there.

Her path from ruin to joy involved God setting things right. The proud would be scattered, the mighty cast down from their thrones and high perches, and like Isaiah before her and her own Jesus son after her: declare that the lowly would be lifted up, and the hungry filled.

Bottom-up restoration. God's way.

There are many lives waiting to be rebuilt and relationships reset. New days to begin. Many broken hearts waiting to be mended. There is no time to waste.