

## “RESTORATION”

**a communion meditation on Isaiah 61:1-11, 1 Thess. 5:12-28, John 1:6-28  
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The Old Testament readings for all four of the Sundays of Advent in this lectionary year are taken from the prophecy of Isaiah. That’s certainly understandable. Just as you can’t celebrate the Christmas story without *Luke’s* Gospel account of the shepherds and the angels, the journey to Bethlehem, and “no room at the inn,” you also can’t *prepare* for the celebration without contemplating Isaiah’s prophetic words about the wolf dwelling with the lamb, a young woman conceiving and giving birth, and the little child that will come to lead the people – whose name will be Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. And you have to hear the words, “comfort, comfort my people says Your God,” and from this morning’s reading: “I will greatly *rejoice* in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God.”

Those prophetic images and words are *all* from Isaiah. But in fairness, they aren’t necessarily all words and images from a single writer or a single moment in Israel’s history. Isaiah’s prophecy is a complex work. It has three distinct settings in time and circumstances – three distinct “scenes,” you might say – and most scholars believe that the second and third scenes are essentially “additions” to what had become a beloved and helpful sacred text, continuing and *extending* Isaiah’s thought and perspective over the course of time.

“First Isaiah,” as scholars refer to it, is comprised of the first 39 chapters of the book. The setting is Jerusalem in Judah, late in the days of the divided monarchy, when the Babylonian empire was gathering its strength and power – like a great storm looming on the horizon, with darkness increasing, and a growing sense of impending doom. Some were living in fear of the future in those days. Others were in complete denial.

In the scene as he laid it out, Isaiah proclaimed that Israel would indeed be punished by God for her sins. But then the time of punishment would come to an end, and “a shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse . . .” In the end, Israel would be restored.

“Second Isaiah” is comprised of chapters 40 – 55, and the setting shifts to Babylon - after the Babylonian army had come, and conquered, and the people of

Israel (some of them, at least) had been taken in captivity, where they had managed to exist in a foreign land for some time.

It is now *late* in the days of captivity – when it is becoming clear that an even *greater* force than the Babylonian army is in turn about to overtake *that* land. The Persians – and Cyrus, their King, who was thought to be not nearly so harsh as the kings of Babylon – is now on the rise, and the Israelites are beginning to be hopeful about their future again.

Second Isaiah begins with our Old Testament reading from *last* week: “Comfort, O Comfort my people. . . Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended.” So it carries forward the prophecy of First Isaiah. The Babylonian captives envision themselves as a new righteous branch that will return to the holy city, where they will finally live again in peace and prosperity.

“Third Isaiah” takes yet *another* step forward in time. For the final chapters of the book (chapters 56 through 66) we have returned to Judah, shortly after the people have arrived home from the years in exile.

And the prophet writes, “the spirit of the Lord God is upon me . . . to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, . . . to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor . . . to provide for those who mourn in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning . . . I will greatly *rejoice* in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God . . .”

I picture this imaginary scene in my head – of Isaiah, standing there among the ruins of what had once been Israel’s grandeur, speaking those words, when one of his companions says: Isaiah. Come here. I mean, c’mon. Have you *seen* this place?

Truth be known, Israel was *never* able to really “build up the ancient ruins,” as the prophecy proclaimed. Even after the people did manage to rebuild their temple, the “old timers” who could remember Solomon’s grand temple *wept* when they saw the new one, according to the book of Ezra. They simply weren’t the same people anymore. They were *still* under foreign domination. They were small in number, and had nowhere *near* the resources that they had in the glorious days of David and Solomon.

All of which eventually led Israel to eventually conclude that their return from exile, while important, was not in itself the initiation of the new “era” of peace and prosperity that Isaiah had prophesied. For that time, they would have to continue to wait.

And so now here we are, in our brief “season of waiting” when all three of Isaiah’s “scenes” are sounded as preludes to the angels’ announcement of the long awaited birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem of Judea.

What I find remarkable about Israel – in all three of the book’s scenes – is the *hopefulness*, and even *joy* that comes through, no matter *what* the current circumstances of the people. So much that it turned heads and made people say, “I want to believe what *he* believes!” And they *did*.

Paul was the same way. Through imprisonment, illness, a shipwreck, persecution, and all the rest, his advice to believers never wavered: “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

On the church calendar, this is “Gaudete” Sunday – the day we light the pink (or *rose*) colored candle, the Sunday on which the Advent themes are “lighter” – when the key word for the day is a word used regularly by both Isaiah and Paul: “rejoice!”

You see, “rejoice” isn’t just a word for Christmas morning. It is an *Advent* word – a word that can be spoken in *any* circumstance as a word of trust that God is in charge, and God is greater than any setback, any defeat, any adversity.

The liturgy of the Lord’s Supper is our example *par excellence* of that concept – the opening section of the service proper is the “Great Thanksgiving” – in which we recall God’s mighty acts through the ages, always coming to our aid in time of need – despite our unworthiness – and then finally sending His only Son, whose *death* we recall in the elements of bread and wine, *through which* we have life.

Come to the table this day and be *joyful*. Let John’s words echo into even the darkest places of your life: “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” The one who is coming will be here soon – humbly born, in a stable. There is much that is wrong about this world. Much that could lead us to despair. But the One who is coming gives us reason to rejoice even in the midst of darkness. Trust in God’s promises, and be grateful.

To God be the glory.