

Isaiah 61:1-4
Psalm 126

Dec 13, 2020 (3rd Advent Year B)

Isaiah 61:1-4

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;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, 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.

Psalm 126: A Song of Ascents.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.'
The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.
May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.
Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Children's Time:

Learning to Walk in the Dark-- Trackless Wastes and Stars to Steer by

Benediction

See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another
and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1st Thess 5:15-18). Amen.

I begin my sermon with a poem authored by Jan Richardson based on Psalm 126. Psalm 126 is one of homecoming, and I will reflect on that further shortly.

“Blessing to Summon Rejoicing”

When your weeping
has watered the earth.

When the storm has been long, and the night,
and the season of your sorrowing.

When you have seemed an exile,
from your life, lost in the far country,
a long way from where your comfort lies.

When the sound of splintering and fracture haunts you.

When despair attends you.

When lack. When trouble. When fear. When pain. When empty.

When lonely. When too much of what depletes you,
and not enough of what restores and rests you.

Then let there be rejoicing.

Then let there be dreaming.

Let there be laughter in your mouth and on your tongue--
shouts of joy.

Let the seeds soaked by tears turn to grain, to bread, to feasting.

Let there be coming home.¹

The 2020 Advent Wait

Advent is a season of waiting. We are waiting for Christmas. We are missing loved ones, and maybe even shedding tears for them. We are waiting for vaccines. We are waiting for travel restrictions to be lifted. We are waiting for a new President down south. We are waiting for an end to loneliness. We are waiting for world peace. We are waiting for peace among the family. We are waiting for peace in our city. We are waiting. We are waiting for the seeds of justice which have been sown in back-breaking efforts to yield sheaves of reconciliation. We are waiting and we are waiting to come home and for loved ones to come home.

The first sermon I heard on Psalm 126 was in a cemetery as my extended family laid the ashes of my grand-mother Preheim to rest in the earth, which will receive us all someday. The country church and its country cemetery, as well as the historic Jacob Preheim homestead, are on the north side of a rock infested and yet gentle valley which descends into the Turkey Creek; a valley carved by glaciers millennia ago. It is a gorgeous landscape. On the day of the burial we gazed out across that valley as we heard Psalm 126 read. As I have previously mentioned,

¹ Jan Richardson, *Circle of Grace* (Orlando, FL: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2015), pp. 45-46.

Psalms 120-134 are part of a collection of songs / Psalms which the pilgrims sang as they came to Jerusalem for one of the three major annual festivals.² The pilgrims were returning to their spiritual home. Sieglinda Preheim was returning to her spiritual home as we marked the transition from her life among us to the life that is beyond this life.³ When we lay precious things in the earth—loved ones or seeds—we sometimes find ourselves with tears.

We wait. We hope. We wait. We are waiting for reunion, for restoration, for renewal, for new crops—we are waiting. We are waiting. This day I am drawn to considerations of the manner in which we might wait well. The scripture texts point us in such a direction.

Take, for example, the beautiful passage we have from 1st Thessalonians which will serve as our benediction today: See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1st Thess 5:15-18). Even as we wait, what are those things for which we can give thanks? This is not some Pollyannish approach to life. The Thessalonian church was located in Provincial capital of the Roman Empire, and their rulers were not too pleased with Christians⁴ -- the Christians there were disadvantaged economically, socially, and in their families. In the midst of hard times and waiting Paul counsels his people to consider those things which sustain us and release unto God those people and concerns which weigh on us. Our tradition insists that we find ways to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” Gratitude is a faith filled way to wait well, and prayer is an antidote to anxiety.⁵ I understand not everyone is at such a point. The text though, invites us to explore gratitude and prayer as a spiritual avenue as we wait.

Isaiah 61 was also a scripture text read this morning. Isaiah 61 is wonderful passage and even more so when set along side the augural sermon of Jesus as presented in Luke 4 (vv. 18-19). Jesus reads pretty much all of Isaiah 61:1-2 as his

² Robert Bratcher and William Reburn, *A Handbook on Psalm*-- part of the United Bible Society Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Society, 1991), p. 1047.

³ This connection alone would have made it a fitting Psalm for a Preheim burial, and then we have agrarian images to boot. Grandma was part of farming and gardening her entire life. “The one that goes forth weeping bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy bringing the sheaves along” (Psalm 126:6). For a lot of us, biblical scholars included, this is such a counter-intuitive and cryptic line we are not sure what to make of it—weeping as we plant our seeds doesn’t seem to make much sense. Some trace this back to an ancient pagan belief that the burying of seed was like a death ritual requiring tears for the gods to look favorably on that which is laid in the soil; some are satisfied with the hard work of planting being contrasted with the joy of harvest; and still other ideas abound.

⁴ Jacob Elias, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*; part of the Believers Church Bible Commentary series (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), p. 29.

⁵ For further exploration on this topic reference the “Joy Practices” of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s section in their *Book of Joy* (NY: Viking hardcover by Penguin Canada, 2016), pp. 307-348.

sermon intro, but he leaves out the point of God's vengeance. Clearly Jesus values Isaiah 61 and sees it inter-related with his forth coming ministry, so it makes me wonder why he would leave off the last bit of Isaiah 61:2 about vengeance. Not only that, but why would lectionary text people even give the likes of me a chance to speculate on such matters during Advent?

Grudges, lingering resentments, vengeance is no way to wait. They are toxins to our bodies and to the systems in which we place some hope. The Mahatma Gandhi is quoted as saying, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind." (Its almost like he was quoting Jesus!; or maybe they had a similar source of wisdom), In his referencing and redaction of Isaiah 61 Jesus is suggesting, I think, that we can hold together a quest for just peace without vengeance or violence. We do this through none other than speaking kindly to our neighbours, and holding them accountable with the Saturday evening party goes a bit late on a day I or my neighbour who serves in the Health Region have responsibilities Sunday morning. We do this through none other than supporting Provincial guidelines during a pandemic, and naming those people and places being underserved. Jesus gives us permission to offer prophetic words in the midst of on-going relationship. Grudges, lingering resentments, vengeance is no way to wait. I offer a brief excursion into waiting during a pandemic from my family encounters.

Pandemic waiting has proved tricky; at least for me and my family. On American Thanksgiving, yes there is another one out there for those holding dual affiliation with the U.S., we had a Preheim family ZOOM. Preheims are scary to look at and even worse to listen to (and on account of my ministry here, most of you know this already). And yet these other Preheims are family. One brother and his family are waiting very cautiously around the COVID crises. The ICU beds are all filled in the surrounding counties; they are shipping their sick and dying north to Kansas City some three hours away. My sister-in-law is a nurse and tests people for COVID-19 every day; she knows the nastiness of the virus. Their family stays largely at home but delivers groceries to my parents upon request; they are very judicious in their visiting.

My other sister-in-law came down with serious (not the worst) symptoms of COVID-19; my brother tested asymptomatic. The effects of the virus linger on with her, and yet they view themselves as having beaten this thing, as invincible; they are planning a winter holiday to California. They visit our aging parents at their whim, which my aging parents appreciate because they are lonely. That side of the family says they know more people who have COVID-19 than don't, so don't be alarmed. Sure, some have died but so it goes.

One brother's family has taken a what I consider to be a fatalistic approach to waiting in which those who will die simply will die. One brother's family has

taken the approach that caution can make a difference in a pandemic world. I do think theology shapes the manner in which we wait. And many of us are waiting differently. Clearly reasoned arguments (at least arguments each position feels is reasoned) are not changing the actions of others. Can we remain in relationship with those making different decisions than us without vengeance?

In citing Isaiah 61 Jesus was saying he was going to do everything he could for the least of these without being vengeful to people still making their way to the light. Our following after Jesus means we, too, will seek care for vulnerable people and refrain from vengeance. I do not mind dying, but I would seriously grieve being the death of anyone else. So I try to wear a mask. I try to visit people outdoors. I try to limit my contacts. We have safe church policies in place for Sundays, which in my mind makes worship at NPMC safer than shopping at any grocery store—and I am guessing a few listening today go out shopping. I am not sure having safe church on Sunday or wearing a mask in public is “good news” to the oppressed or proclaiming “liberty to the captives”, but I do want that those who mourn might be comforted.⁶ I am striving for this. We are striving for this.

I have reflected upon Psalm 126, 1st Thessalonians, Isaiah 61, and even the sordid lot known as Preheims. It is time to close things down. I will conclude with a quote of one wiser than I. This comes from Wendy Wright in her response to the words of Luke 4 in relation to Isaiah 61:

Promise is at the heart of the season of the Coming. Opening our hearts to the radical nature of the promise is the initial invitation of the liturgical moment in which we find ourselves. The further invitation is to believe. By belief I do not mean primarily intellect assent, nor do I mean a sort of blind faith in something we are told we should assent to. To believe something (in a religious sense) is not simply to hold an opinion; it is to let that something sink down into the marrow of your bones and form the structure of your life. To believe something is to let its affirmation become the inhalation and exhalation of your life’s breath.⁷

May we believe again this Advent that God seeks to be with us. May we wait well as we inhale and exhale. May we live lives of not only of peace, but justice. Come, Lord Jesus; come to us again. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

⁶ For a well articulated argument to close churches for worship at this time please read Jared Siebert’s editorial “Most churches trying to take care of own” in *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (Thursday, Dec 3, 2020), p. A4.

⁷ Wendy M. Wright, *The Vigil: Keeping Watch in the Season of Christ’s Coming* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), pp. 25-26.