

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 brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, 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

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 us, and we rejoiced."

Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negev. 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.

LUKE 1:46-55

And Mary said, *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me and holy is his name.*

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.

SOWING JOY

Isaiah 61:1-4

Psalm 126

Luke 1:46-55

What words would you use to describe the state of the world right now? *Dangerous? Unstable? Tumultuous? Unfair?* And what words would you use to describe your own life right now? *Confined? Boring? Lonely? Sad?* Adjectives like *carefree, ecstatic, jubilant, tickled* would probably not make the list. At best, we might be *contented*. That would be good. No, life on planet earth is pretty grim right now. And it isn't just the virus—though that certainly makes first page headlines—it is climate change, political unrest, poverty, racism, pollution...I'll stop there. My goal is not to see how depressed I can make you. You're probably already doing a pretty good job of that by yourself!

Nevertheless, I do believe it is good to acknowledge the obvious realities we face in our lives. Because we are well beyond the point of denial anymore and we need to have a faith response to our tribulations in order to navigate our way through them. And these days, right now, as we approach Christmas may be the most challenging, we will face. For many, the holidays without a virus are formidable enough, but this year with the prospect of unoccupied places at the dinner table and the absence of the laughter of grandchildren, the entire season is a prescription for grief.

But let's face it. What is currently going on with the world is not uncharacteristic of the entire history of the human race. Our scriptures for this morning are underlaid by grief: *The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted...to comfort all who mourn.* That is just Isaiah. The psalmist pleads to God: *Restore our fortunes...May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.* Isn't loss, misfortune and grief a universal component of the human experience? And isn't it the role of our faith to provide light at the end of the tunnels we must travel through? Which of us is not seeking to find hope, even joy in our lives? How do we get through the hard times without that? Despair is not what we

wish for ourselves.

Mary could have given herself over to despair given her single status and her pregnancy in a society that would permanently condemn both her and her child to a life of shame. But Mary had a dream that God had anointed her to be a catalyst for a major change in human history. Her lowly status in her community was not an impediment to her role in God's plan for the future. Do not the scriptures make clear over and over that God' solidarity lies with the poor and the shunned of society? *_ He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

What Mary does is anticipate joy. Civil rights activist, Ruby Sales, writes: "What's up with Mary? What does she, a poor adolescent unwed mother, whom the Roman Empire and her community press down to the lowest rung on the social ladder, have to sing about? Why would she thank God and celebrate the coming of a new child in a colonized world, where the Roman Empire, the most brutal and egregious of Empires, will close doors in an attempt to reduce her child's life to the barest bones of possibilities and options?"

Give Joseph credit too. Knowing she was pregnant, he married her anyway, but those who knew them would perceive that it was a shotgun job. And we forget that Jesus would quietly be known as a bastard child. How is that for irony? But Mary saw possibilities and could envision something much greater for her progeny. In spite of the hardships and complications, she could Sow seeds of Joy for the future.

Another thing we need to remember is that to be a person of faith, you must have a long view of history. We have grown so accustomed to instant gratification in our lives—I get antsy when my computer makes me wait five seconds before connecting to the internet. But gardening has required me to be more patient in my expectations. I put my tomatoes in the ground too early this year and we had the unpredictable cold snap around Mother's _Day and they never really did recover resulting in a poor harvest and premature end to the season. But

in the meantime, several volunteers emerged from seeds that had been laying in the ground for who knows how long and provided me with the best bounty of the year.

This is the way it is with our dreams, our visions of how the world could be, of how our lives could be. Yes, we have been totally thrown off course by the pandemic; yes, our country is undergoing enormous political strife with our citizens building fortresses against one another which seem impenetrable; and yes, the entire world is struggling to come to terms with the virus, climate change, economic inequities and much more.

While there is plenty to wring our hands over and cry about, that also means there is plenty of fertile soil to sow seeds of joy. The greatest changes in human history have come as responses to dark periods that seemed hopeless in their magnitude. And so, a person of faith can view troubling times as an opportunity to plant. Perhaps the seeds don't germinate in our lifetimes. But does that mean we will never plant a tree if we won't live long enough to see it reach its majestic height? Former slave and reformer Harriet Tubman noted that "Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world."

And so, my friends, this is hardly a time to retreat from our vision of God's world. We need God and God needs us to *wear garlands instead of ashes; to anoint ourselves with the oil of gladness instead of mourning and to wear the mantle of praise instead of having a faint spirit. We should be called oaks of righteousness who build up the ancient ruins; raising up the former devastation and repairing the cities. Within us we bear the seed for sowing and shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying the sheaves.*

Reverend Thomas Dunlap

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