

Sermon “Winter Harvest”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

I Thessalonians 5:16-24

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Our first scripture reading this third Sunday of Advent is Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. This wonderful, lyrical poem anticipates a reversal of fortunes, shaped by the power of God. It is a prophecy about new beginnings and second chances. The defeated shall become “oaks of stability,” the ruins shall become restored, those who mourn will know joy as the earth brings forth new shoots... The God, whose power will shape these new beginnings, is the God who loves justice and who hates oppression, robbery and wrongdoing. Hear now, God’s holy word.

1 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; God 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; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, 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 God's 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 God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God 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.

In our second scripture reading, I Thessalonians 5:16-24, Paul concludes his earliest letter to believers with a series of short injunctions that encourage faithful living in anticipation of Christ’s return. Rather than words like “obey,” “serve,” “submit,” the manner of life imagined here is characterized by delight, by gratitude, by confidence. We are not inclined to give thanks for all circumstances of our lives, however the text envisions no situation in the midst of which we cannot recognize expressions of divine mercy and give God thanks. Believers are also called to a life of discernment which can be found within the faith community and, finally, believers are called to lives that are holy, strong and sound...like oaks of righteousness. Hear now the word of God.

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace, God's ownself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and God will do this. Amen.

The title of the sermon: Winter Harvest

The text: *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. Isaiah 61:11*

Let us pray: O Lord our God, in this Advent Season, remind us of the mystery of your Spirit working within our lives, even in times of darkness and dormancy. Remind us again of who you are and who you call us to be that we may rejoice and stay strong in each season and circumstance within our lives. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you. Amen.

In our kitchen a Christmas Cactus is in full bloom. This popular holiday plant, although not actually a cactus, is a succulent that belongs to the same family as cactuses. A native to tropical locations, it thrives, it thrives as a household plant. The lovely arches of flowers in shades of pink and red that blossom during the dark days of winter give it the name of Christmas cactus.

What a poignant and joyous reminder this is of the meaning that lies hidden in the heart of sorrow, the hope we find in the saving death of our Risen Lord born to us on Christmas Day, and the affirmation in Psalm 126: "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Westminster's Chancel Choir has been sending us forth each Sunday during Advent with these words:

*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming
from tender stem hath sprung,
Of Jesse's lineage coming,
by faithful prophets sung.
It came, a flower-et bright,
amid the cold of winter,
When half spent was the night.*

Often it is only in retrospect that we see God's Spirit at work *amid the cold of winter and half spent nights* in our lives. We look back, we reminisce, and we marvel at how these desolate and dark times have fostered a resilience and a strength that make us whole and who we are today.

The summer after Peter and I moved to Springfield, one of Peter's closest and dearest friends was killed in a bicycle accident in St. Louis. It was the night of June 20, 2014. Rick Beard had just begun his Solstice adventure riding his bike from sunset until sunrise on the shortest night of the year. He loved these kind of physical or intellectual challenges.

A graduate of West Point and a Special Forces Ranger, Rick served as an Army Captain overseeing 600 men on the Iron Curtain before the wall came down. He returned to graduate school to earn an MBA from Harvard and eventually planted the seed for a new company, Cardinal Investment Advisors, in September of 2011. This company grew *amid the darkness* of that time to become a thriving firm which advises \$133 billion in client assets today.

Rick was smart, loyal, and hard-working. His family, friends and colleagues still miss him. In recent weeks while our son Paul has been forging *the dark days of law school finals amid the half spent nights*, with affection we have called forth Rick's spirit remembering one of his mottos to Paul. When things were difficult or challenging, Rick's advice was always "Suck it up!" He didn't say these words to those he loved and respected in a mean or condescending way. He spoke these words as one who understood both the difficulty and the importance of doing so. He spoke these words because he believed one would never regret giving one's all and being thankful in each and every circumstance and season of life.

The Prophet Isaiah speaks words of comfort and hope to the Israelites who lived Rick's motto during their Babylonian exile. As *their cold of winter* comes to an end and they are invited to return home to rebuild their lives, it is the seeds that have been sown and nourished during this season of their winter harvest which will make possible the second chance and new beginnings God has given.

It was during the Babylonian exile—*the cold of winter* that the Israelites matured and came into their own. They began to understand the character and expectation of Yahweh in a deeper and more profound way, as the One who loves justice and hates wrongdoing, the One who brings good news to the oppressed, and the One who binds up the broken hearted. Yes, it was during *their cold of winter, their season of discontent, their half spent nights* that the Israelites came to understand who God is and who God calls them to be... a people who love kindness, who seek justice, and who practice humility... a people who advocate for the poor and the marginalized and who treat others with dignity and respect.

In Hebrew Scripture, a person of faith, the one who trusts in God is compared to a tree, who, *in the year of drought is not anxious, and does not cease to bear fruit.*" And so as they find themselves captive, homesick, defeated and "cut down," the promise that they would once again become *oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord* was cause for great joy and hope.

Israel's memory is what forms the basis of this hope and sustains them through the winter harvest. Yahweh, the God of Israel, possessed a long and distinguished story, which, at the heart and core, was a narrative of judgement transformed into redemption and new beginnings. Because the people of Israel remembered the story and knew that life could never be lived apart from Yahweh, they sheltered strong hopes and expectations about both the present and the future. The people of Israel remembered their former joy and that remembrance enabled them to see beyond their present tears.

Like Israel of old, the church remembers God's long and distinguished story; however, they are memories vested in Jesus of Nazareth---in his birth, in his life, in his redemptive death and resurrection. And because we remember what God has done in the Savior born to Mary amid the cold of winter when half spent was the night, we also have certain hopes and expectations concerning what God can and will do.

The God who causes *a new shoot to spring from the earth* is the God who is sowing seeds of hope and joy amid the dark of winter. The God of resurrection and new beginnings is the God who is faithfully working through the winter harvests in each of our lives whenever they come. Remember the story of our faith, have hope, be at peace, and rejoice. Amen.