

Joy To (and For) the World

The words that we have inherited from Isaiah are a compilation of several different voices preaching to different people in different moments. Weeks ago, we heard some of Isaiah's earliest words as he spoke of his moment in the Temple when he witnessed the seraphim singing back and forth to each other, celebrating and recalling to one another that the earth is (not *was*, but *is*) full of God's glory. In a little over a month, we will hear some of these same words spoken by Jesus as he preaches for his home congregation for the first time. First, however, we hear the prophet Isaiah preach and speak to a community surrounded by ruins. [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11]

Devastation, shock, disbelief...these were many of the words people used to describe the deep sadness that flooded much of the world as we watched the Cathedral of Notre Dame engulfed in flames almost five years ago. I remember staring in horror at the television while flames shot up within her walls, and I remember tears streaming down my own face as I watched impromptu choirs singing hymns all over the city giving voice to our deepest emotions when words did not suffice.¹ The world stood and stared and wept and grieved and wondered if this place of beauty and history and hope could be saved. Michael Kimmelman, an architecture scholar reminded me this past week that Notre Dame is more than a holy place for faithful Roman Catholics; she is central to the life of France.² All distances to Paris are measured from Notre Dame's front door. In other words, all roads quite literally lead to that sanctuary. Kimmelman spoke of friends who live in Paris who had come to think of Notre Dame as a nuisance and a hassle, a place thronged by annoying tourists who made Parisians' commutes more troublesome. These friends wondered aloud at their grief over the burning of the church, naming a deep sense that something precious had been lost.

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=323MpjYoQxE&ab_channel=TheEarfulTower

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/11/podcasts/the-daily/notre-dame-reopens.html>

When we first met Isaiah, the Exile was looming. The northern kingdom of ancient Israel was on the cusp of defeat. Judah the southern kingdom was not far behind. And Isaiah's grand moment of "Here I am. Send me," was quickly followed by God spelling out how difficult Isaiah's call would be, prompting Isaiah to ask how long the devastation would last. And now in the portion of the book known to scholars as Third Isaiah, the prophet celebrates a new or renewed calling in the wake of the Exiles' return. There is no king. The Temple lies in ruins. The ones who stayed behind are scrounging and scraping for food. The ones who have returned are staring down a Jerusalem that in no way resembles the place their grandparents left. And Isaiah—or the Isaiah who stands with the people in this moment—hears God calling once again:

The Lord God's spirit is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.

He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives...to comfort all who mourn.³

The prophet still has a job to do: bring good news now, bind up broken hearts now, declare freedom now for those bound by every kind of prison, and comfort those who mourn now. The prophet is called to speak and preach and proclaim, to speak God's good news not in a sweet by and by way, but now, to remind the people that God is present now, at work now, re-creating, restoring, and redeeming in real time. And the prophet is not the only one with a job description in this text. *They* have one, too. The ones with on-the-mend hearts, the ones being freed from captivity, the being-comforted ones, **THEY** are to do the work of rebuilding, **THEY** will be part of this new creation work God has in mind. These job descriptions are ours, too. Yes, we are in the thick of Advent, waiting for Christ to be born in us and among us again. **AND** we are the church now, the Body of Christ—or at least one small part of it—now. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, too. We are called to watch and wait for the coming of Christ, and in the meantime, we have work to do.

Support for the rebuilding of Notre Dame moved more quickly than the flames that all but destroyed her. Funds from all over poured in as the French government threw its support behind bringing her back from

³ Isaiah 61: 1-2, Common English Bible

the ashes. Notre Dame had been propped up and restored before over the course of her long history, but this restoration is different. Napoleon gussied her up with tapestries draped over gaping holes to be a fitting backdrop for his coronation, but he did not commit any real effort to rebuilding her walls. So the determination to restore her this time is compelling because there is a determination to restore her well and meticulously. This is no superficial patch up job. Artisans with very particular skills, stonemasons and wood carvers have been commissioned to rebuild this ancient ruin, stone by stone, rafter by rafter.

Michael Kimmelman had the opportunity to get a behind the scenes tour before the cathedral reopened to the public. He says up front that construction sites are not usually happy places because of the stress around supplies, demands, and deadlines. Notre Dame was different. The workers he noticed were “remarkably happy” and collegial, with laborers from competing firms working alongside one another and sharing hammers. He attributes this joy to a shared feeling of mission as they worked alongside one another on something bigger and longer lasting than themselves.

Toward the end of his tour, Kimmelman asked his guide if she was Catholic. She said that she was. He then asked her, “What has it meant for you to be working on this project?” The woman struggled to find words for close to a minute, and then, Kimmelman says, “She wept.” Kimmelman understood her reaction to be one of gratitude and joy that she gets to live in a moment when she not only witnessed the devastation, but that she can also be part of the restoration of this holy place, that she could lend her gifts, her skills to this good work of rebuilding a sanctuary that means so much to so many. I think he’s right, *and* I think there’s more to the story. I believe this woman understands her work to be a holy calling, a call to bear witness through her work to the glory of God, the God who is not stopped by division or destruction, the God who is ever present, the God who is always inviting human beings like her and you and me to be a part of God’s good, hard work of repairing the world, stone by stone, brick by brick, step by step.

I will never be a highly skilled stone mason. I do not excel in crafting stained glass. Honestly, I’m not all that gifted with Play-Doh or Legos, and yet, I wept when Kimmelman described this woman’s tears, because I too know what it means to be a part of God’s work of rebuilding amid destruction. I have painted trim for a

Habitat House in Greenville, NC alongside college students from New Jersey in the wake of hurricanes of every kind. I have sung hymns alongside worshipers in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico while violent gangs threatened to undo every bit of hopeful work. And I have walked alongside churches including this one who remain determined to find a courageous and faithful way forward in the face of a larger world that is hell-bent on dividing us up along every line and ferociously determined to shout a false and dangerous gospel of hatred, cynicism, self-preservation, and despair.

The truth is that we do not have to travel somewhere as exotic as Paris to be part of God's rebuilding brigade. I have seen you serve meals at the Night Shelter and shine light with Esther's Heart. And I have heard your longing to be present—not simply with money but with hammers, buckets, nails, and hugs—for our siblings in the western part of the state in the wake of Helene.

The work of building and rebuilding—whether it's an ancient cathedral, homes in Swannanoa, neighborhoods in Concord, or the Temple in Isaiah's Jerusalem—is not simply about physical structures but also about community and human connection. And when voices from every corner do everything under the sun to pit us against one another and against our neighbors, this work of tending broken hearts, comforting mourners, reassuring those imprisoned by any number of forces that they are in fact created to be free, sharing hammers, and mixing mortar to help each other stack brick upon brick is holy and powerful and yes, joyful. And as the poet David Gates writes, joy is an act of rebellion because it defies the powers that insist at the top of their lungs that all is lost.

Before Kimmelman was able to enter the cathedral in progress, he had to shed his street clothes and put on a special protective suit. There was still a concern about lead contamination and those in charge wanted to take care of every person who entered as well as the city outside Notre Dame's doors. To even witness this work, Kimmelman had to agree to put on something new. Toward the end of our text this morning, the prophet speaks of being newly clothed as well:

I surely rejoice in the Lord; my heart is joyful because of my God,

because he has clothed me with clothes of victory, wrapped me in a robe of righteousness.⁴

The prophet embraces the rebuilding work and celebrates the promise of restoration, and he never takes credit for any of it. This work is God's work, and it is God who gives this mourning and weary one a new robe of righteousness, meaning not self-righteousness, but right relationship with God and neighbor. The robe marks a reset, a new beginning. In baptism we are clothed anew, marked as God's own as we are welcomed into the family of faith. Baptism does not change the reality that we are God's beloved children before a drop of water is placed on our heads. My baptism is a reminder more for me than for the rest of the world that God has big plans for me, for us and for God's weary world, not for our glory but for God's.

As Kimmelman walked through the workers and the work, I imagine that the suit he wore served to remind him again and again how privileged he was to be a witness to the astonishing restoration he was seeing. Our baptism serves a similar role. A significant difference is that we wear that God-given robe everywhere we go. Our baptism is not bound by this building, nor is our call to do the rebuilding work God has called us to do. Kimmelman shed his protective gear as he left Notre Dame; he did not shed his immense joy and awe, however. And as his faithful guide teared up with joy, I sense that he found himself tearing up, too. He pointed out that the world outside Notre Dame's walls is still in need of restoration, and yet, in his voice I heard hopefulness and even joy, that such restoration is possible.⁵

On this third Sunday of Advent, Joy Sunday, we will close by singing "Joy to the World, the Lord is come." Yes, Jesus has come, born among us thousands of years ago. And we long for Jesus to come and make everything right at some point. And the Lord has been here all along; God never left. Even in the thick of exile, destruction, and division, God has not, does not, and will not go anywhere. So God keeps inviting, anointing, and outfitting the children of God—prophets, pray-ers, preachers, teachers, singers, and laborers alike—to join

⁴ Isaiah 61:10, CEB

⁵ I am indebted to Michale Kimmelman's first person account of touring Notre Dame and to my friend and colleague, the Rev. Jessica Tate for sharing this podcast with me.

God in the holy work of mending broken hearts, comforting mourners, freeing captives, and rebuilding communities and cathedrals alike, because God knows, we could use all the joy we can get. As startling as it may be, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, dear ones, to do this world-mending and community-restoring work, which means you get joy and you get joy and they get joy, too. Joy to—and for—the world indeed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.