

Healing and Joy!
Pastor Jonna Bohigian
Isaiah 61

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On this third Sunday of Advent, we travel back in time, about 2,500 years. We join the prophet in Isaiah, in a beautiful passage called “Isaiah 61.” We close our eyes and soak in his words. “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach *good news* to the poor. He has sent me to *bind up* the brokenhearted, to proclaim *freedom* for the captives and release from *darkness* for the prisoners, to proclaim the *year* of the Lord’s *favor*” (Isa 61:1 – 2a).

These words, now heard in the context of the Year of Our Lord 2020, evoke in us something *new* – perhaps longing, hope, joy, disbelief, a combination of feelings, or even none at all. Any and all of these feelings are understandable in a year like we have experienced – and *continue* to experience.

I saw an advertisement for a t-shirt, which had a picture of 5 stars and only *1* of them filled in. It read: “2020.” **(picture)** Now, I’m not the most sarcastic person in the world, but I’ve wondered for *months* whether or not to buy that t-shirt!

And perhaps at this point, one star seems *too* generous. The disruption, instability, fear, anger, poverty, unrest, isolation, addiction, natural disasters, illness, and countless lives lost on a *global scale* is genuinely too much for someone to wrap their mind around. It’s too much! You and I *can’t* deny the pain that is in and around us, so we *beg* with the psalmist, **(verses)** “How *long*, oh Lord?!” And we *beg* with Isaiah, **(verse)** “Oh, that You would *rend* the heavens and come down, that the mountains would *tremble* before you!” “After all this, Lord, will You hold

Yourself back? Will You keep silent and punish us forever?” (Isa 64:1, 12). *When will this be over?!*

Like a parched person in the desert, so we *long* for God. We are *desperate* for His healing and joy, so we listen to these words from Isaiah with fresh ears.

Allow me paint the setting for you. **(pictures)** God’s people have been divided, and Israel, the northern kingdom, has been annihilated. Judah, the southern kingdom, has been conquered. The king, the warriors, the wealthy, and skilled have all been exiled to Babylon. The poor and a few others have been allowed to remain in Judah to do their oppressor’s bidding, and to work the fields and vineyards for them. Judah’s center of worship, the temple, where *God’s presence* resided, has been burned to the ground. Jerusalem is destroyed – the palace, every house and important building are burned, and the city walls are broken down.

After a number of years, the exiles are allowed to return home. But it’s been *decades* since they’ve lived in Judah, and some have built substantial lives in Babylon. The majority will stay in Babylon. But some will risk *everything*, leaving family and livelihoods behind, to build a *new life* in Jerusalem. But when they arrive in Jerusalem, they see *utter devastation* – no houses, no temple, no palace, and no city wall.

The place their parents and grandparents once called home is in *ruins*. There is *nothing* nostalgic about this place; even saying that it’s a shell of what it used to be is generous. They will need to start from the ground up.

It is into this setting that the prophet speaks. He has been anointed and given the Spirit to proclaim good news to the poor, to announce the year of the Lord’s favor, and vengeance on their enemies. To replace their mourning with joy, their despair with a garment of praise. Their ruins will be rebuilt, and the places devastated for generations will be restored. Others will serve

them. Others will tend *their* flocks and work *their* fields and vineyards. God will make an everlasting covenant with them, and all people will acknowledge that they are blessed by the Lord.

What a word of promise! Everything that has been wrong – all their oppression, devastation, and pain – will be righted.

We want a promise like this too! We want the promise that everything that has been destroyed during this season will be healed, that our sorrow will turn to joy, that relationships will be set right, that *next year* will be the year of the Lord's favor.

We are *desperate* for healing and joy! We *long* to see physical evidence that God is at work, that large scale good is happening, that a smile on someone's face is because the world is *actually becoming* a better place. This longing is a beautiful thing. This longing is a reminder of the world we were created to live in, to *thrive* in, and of the promise to come.

This past summer, I caught up with a cousin of mine, who was on break from college. He shared how he was “kicking butt and taking names” with his studies. And then he told me something that I've heard many young people say. “I *never* want to have kids and bring them into this terrible world. If I ever have kids, I will adopt.”

Little did *he* know, I was pregnant. I thought back to when I debated that same question, of whether it is good and right to bring a baby into this broken world. I thought back to how I have looked at babies with compassion, knowing all too well that they will grow older and encounter our common pain. I thought back to the first time I instinctively *wanted* to have children, when my last living grandparent, died. **(picture)** As my family gathered to mourn Grandpa Roland and to commend him to the Lord, I had this overwhelming desire to bring *life* into the world. We know death all too well; I want to be a bearer of *life*!

As a small remnant of Judah came back to Jerusalem, it was likely difficult to envision a life of restoration and joy; the landscape looked *bleak*. But they continued on, trusting in the faithfulness of God to fulfill His word.

Some of Isaiah's words came to pass in their lifetimes. And 500 years later, a man named Jesus stands to read Scripture in his hometown synagogue, and is given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He reads, **(verse)** "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He sits down and says, "Today this scripture is *fulfilled* in your hearing" (Lk 4:18 – 19, 21b).

The prophesy of healing and restoration, the promise of joy proclaimed over Judah, is fulfilled in Jesus 500 years later. *He* is the One who comes to the poor, the broken, the outcast, the blind, the ones oppressed by sin, and restores them into the family of God. *He* is the One who welcomes the least likely people – people who would naturally *hate* each other – and brings them into *his* family, calling them *his* brothers and sisters. *He* is the One who brings joy when all that is seen is destruction. *He* is the One who promises that one day, all will be made right. *He* is the One who comes into the cracked and broken places of *your* life to bring healing and joy!

This healing and joy begins in us. **(picture)** And like a stone thrown into a pond, it sparks a *ripple* effect. The stone, now out of our hands, begins a chain reaction.

One of those chain reactions that we never saw coming has been a result of your faithful giving to the ministry of St. Timothy's. During this extenuating season of shutdowns and unemployment, *many* of you have continued to give *generously*. As a result, *not only* have we been able to bring on staff to serve St. Timothy's and our community, we have also been able to

extend that generosity to our neighbors – through FISH, disaster relief, CityTeam, and a new project called “United Against the Poverty Pandemic.” (**website**)

The shutdowns to protect health and lives due to COVID-19 have caused a *serious* problem for families in *many* fields, (**graph**) especially: hospitality, construction, services, and trade and transport. As a result, many have been unable to pay their rent. For many, this unpaid rent has not yet become a serious problem because of the eviction moratorium. But when it lifts, (**graph**) Santa Clara County is expecting 14,600 *households* to become homeless. 14,600 households, which includes 25,000 children.

This homeless eventuality is so stark, that the city and county are *unable* to fully address this crisis. It is simply more than the government can do. So the city asked the Christian faith community to consider ways to prevent a massive, imminent homelessness.

In response to this request, CityTeam, Healing Grove Health Center, and a number of other local non-profits have come together and have created a plan to minimize this crisis. They now are calling on Christians and churches to prayerfully consider extending generosity toward our neighbors in these at-risk sectors, maintaining or increasing employment, and offering financial gifts to prevent homelessness. Financial gifts will be received by Healing Grove, which will then screen individuals at risk for homelessness and disburse monies with thoughtfulness.

Because of your continued generosity, St. Timothy’s has been able to direct a gift toward this effort. And what a gift it is, to be a part of Jesus’ proclamation of bringing good news to the poor! What a gift, that *together*, we can be agents of healing and joy! Healing and joy, which cannot come at the hands of government or any well-intentioned person, but by those who have been transformed by the love of Jesus! Agents which cause a *ripple* effect to our neighbors, our communities, and the world. And may Jesus be glorified to the ends of the earth! Amen.