

Out Of The Ruins And Rubble – Janika Grimlund

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Last week, Pastor Niquita brought up the song, “Prepare Ye,” from the theatrical retelling of the Jesus story, “Godspell.” For those of you who haven’t seen the musical, it ends right after the crucifixion; notice, after the crucifixion... not the resurrection. Basically, Jesus dies, Judas runs off, they sing a medley of songs, THE End.

Now, I... wanted to see the resurrection. I always would bear through the crucifixion in any Easter movie in my childhood because I knew the resurrection was coming. “Godspell” provides no such closure. I found myself sitting a little longer in my seat after bows, waiting for the actors to come back on stage. “Just kidding, it doesn’t end here. Jesus is alive!” But no...I was left in anticipation.

I find myself in the same sort of space during this Advent season... Wait, this can’t be it. Something else happens. The story isn’t over! I’m turning to my fellow playgoers saying, “No wait! Don’t leave, don’t give up! Something else happens.... I know this story.”

Last week we talked about preparing the way; this week’s tradition and lectionary point us toward joy—joyful living, joyful practice. Joyful anticipation.

“We were like dreamers, we were rejoicers.” Our Psalm reads: *Restore [us], O LORD... 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.*

I grew up on a farm... and let me tell you there is a period of weeping when it comes time to plant. There is a whole lot of anticipation, anxiety and excitement. The psalmist is remembering a previous time when all was well, the harvest was large, and there was time for daydreaming. He remembers God’s mercies of old and is joyful. The lament in this poem hardly feels painful... It reminds me of the same feeling I had after watching “Godspell”—joyful, terrifying anticipation.

The psalmist’s memory creates hope and joy. And you see...the church, the people of God have a memory too!

What do we remember?

The Israelites from our Isaiah text remembered when they were freed from slavery in Egypt. They are remembering the story of God’s faithfulness to Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob. These stories and these memories are what keeps them in anticipation and joy for the next part of the story!

The Anointed One in Isaiah claims to be sent from the Father *to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the ... prisoners and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.* Of course, they are in joyful anticipation!

Some scholars believe that this year of the Lord's favor is what the Jews would have known as the Year of Jubilee. Historically, every 50 years those who owed debts would be released from those debts and they would have their land returned to them. It was in fact a rearranging of economic power. These formerly oppressed and imprisoned peoples will find comfort and rehabilitation, and begin to rebuild the city.

The church in Thessalonica remembers that Jesus who had been crucified is now alive! They anticipate his return, and they have a memory that creates joy and hope.

This congregation was beginning to get antsy for the *parousia*, or the second coming of Christ. Do you find yourself antsy for the coming of the kingdom? Paul wrote them this friendship letter to encourage the church in their anticipation and waiting.

This is a letter of memory and reminiscing... you know, when you are having a conversation with a long lost friend? You spend most of the time laughing and talking about events of the past. I think Paul was using this tactic to encourage this church! "Remember how I used to be with you, remember how faithful God has been to us! I wish to be with you soon," he says. He closes this letter with *Rejoice always, ... give thanks in all circumstances, ... hold fast to what is good, abstain from every form of evil*. I think he is saying, "I know you are still waiting... And we remember all these mercies of old, but we are still waiting, so this is what we should do in the meantime." While we are waiting we are to remember, to rejoice, and to give thanks.

But what EXACTLY are WE waiting for? Israel was waiting their Messiah; I was waiting for Justin Langley to come back on stage glowing with wound makeup on his hands and feet; the early church was waiting for Jesus to make his way back to earth to finish the job.

So, what are each of us in this building waiting for today? Why do we put ourselves through the pain of the Advent season when our Savior has already come, died, and resurrected? Turns out... we don't know what we are waiting for.

The crowd listening to John has memories of the prophets who promised a Messiah and they have memory of the restored city of their ancestors.

They thought they knew what they were waiting for. "You must be Elijah," they said to John. "No? The prophet? No? The Messiah!"

They thought they knew what they were looking for but John corrects them... "The one you are looking for *you do not know*. The One you are waiting for ... is not what you are expecting. You don't know him."

The Jews thought they knew what they were waiting for, but they were very wrong. They were waiting for a military leader—they got a low-class kid in a feeding bin. They got so worked up waiting for the wrong thing that when Jesus finally showed up, they didn't recognize him, and they crucified him.

Let us not make the same mistake as we are waiting. We can have joy because we know God has been faithful in the past, but we don't know exactly what we are waiting for. The kingdom of God? What is that? Probably not what we are expecting.

We are anticipating the next part of the story, but what if the rest of the story isn't what we want? What if the kingdom of God isn't run by capitalism? What if the rest of the story is the reordering of economic power? What if the kingdom of God includes other religions? What if the kingdom of God is something we are striving toward, not something that will just appear on the clouds someday? I'm only asking because I don't know the answer...

This is why I think Paul gives the instructions he does to Thessalonica. By following these instructions, we can prevent ourselves from crucifying the very thing we have been anticipating: remembering God's mercies of old and rejoicing; giving thanks in the midst of all circumstances... even circumstances that make us uncomfortable, lest we hinder the coming of the kingdom; praying without ceasing.

Do not quench the Spirit or despise the words of prophets—because this is how we will discern and test what is good and what is evil.

My hope for the church this Advent season is to identify places where we might be crucifying the very thing we are waiting for. I'm here to say, "Wait... no! Don't leave... it's not over." We know this story. We cannot be sure what it is that we anticipate, but we know this is not the end. So let us find joy in what we know about God's faithfulness, and wisely anticipate what we do not know.