

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 & Luke 1: 46b-55

Comfort and Joy

The other day, I was invited to a holiday dinner by a couple who lived in the East Mountains on the east side of Sandia Mountains where things are looking a lot more like Christmas than in Albuquerque (think, La Cueva). They were recent empty nesters and retirees, so they were enjoying the peace and calm of the season. Upon entering their house with high ceilings, I saw that my friend had touched every inch of her home with Christmas decoration. I sipped wine sitting in the living room, leaning on the reindeer cushions, admiring their Christmas Tree by the crackling wood stove; green garlands cascaded down the handrail of the long stairs, the soap dish and hand towels had Christmas bells in the guest bathroom. Santa Clause was peeking out from every corner, and miniature packages of presents tied up in gold strings hung from decorative pegs on the wall. I was then seated at the dinner table adorned with a centerpiece of candle held in a wreath with wide ribbons, and look, there was a miniature Christmas stocking on top of the Christmas napkins on my plate. I resisted the temptation to feel the stocking to see if there was a present inside.

This beautiful home screamed “Comfort and Joy.” I’m just being sarcastic because I’m jealous; I have only a wreath and a few Christmas pillows out in my house. Her house was fully decked out for Christmas, and it did make me feel all cozy and warm, evoking a feeling akin to comfort and joy. And because I knew something about the character of this person, I could trust that her loving touch evident in every corner of her house was an expression of “comfort and joy” that she personally knew deep at her core. She wasn’t just showing off her mastery in the art of holiday decorating. She was proclaiming the timeless Christmas promise of “Comfort and Joy” to everyone who entered her home.

Earlier that day, another friend was having quite a different experience. She had failed to show up for a Zoom meeting that afternoon and she emailed us later explaining why. For her, it had been a really hectic and stressful few weeks taking her elderly sister with dementia who had multiple medical issues to the ER, trying to get her admitted to the hospital, and then trying to get her out of it when the medication they gave her was making her confused and fearful, then, oh, the pain of coordinating the transfer of her sister’s medical records between multiple doctors with no support from anyone, while trying to get the instructions so that she can properly care for her sister at home.... When the most urgent matters had been seen to, she wrote, “the Tree finally

went up on Tuesday, so Christmas is happening.” Her days were full of appointments and complications and there was no time nor room for “Comfort and Joy,” but she made sure that the tree went up so Christmas will happen and not inadvertently missed, buried under her overcrowded calendar, like that Zoom meeting for which she was a no-show. Out of the chaos of her day, she grabbed hold of Christmas for the promise of “Comfort and Joy,” which she so needed just now. ...

Over the many Christmases that have come and gone in our lives, we may have found ourselves in a similar place as these two friends were in, or somewhere in between. What is this message of Comfort and Joy that finds us every Christmas no matter what we are going through. And where is our Comfort and Joy this Christmas?

Today’s passage from Isaiah begins with the pronouncement of good news and concludes with joy. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.” This is the voice of a Hebrew prophet writing more than 500 years before Jesus was born. “God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed....” The prophet was declaring God’s intention, what God will do for God’s people who were just returning from 70 years of life in exile, stripped of their identity as a people, and were facing the monumental task of rebuilding their community. To them God promised liberty, healing, comfort, restoration, and strength to repair what had been brought down for generations.

And God will do this BECAUSE God loves justice and hate robbery and wrongdoing; God’s people had been robbed and now God will make them whole again. The justice that rules their land and the people living in right relationship with God and with one another will be the sign of God’s blessings that their former oppressors will see. God looks upon those who are oppressed, release them from the captivity, fill them with gladness, brings comfort... and what it does to the people is that they themselves become the vessel for God’s purposes in the world, a witness to God’s justice and righteousness, and joy comes from that. There is this movement from Comfort TO Joy; or Comfort, and then Joy. It becomes their joy to live as a people of good news, liberation, justice and comfort. And the result of such joyful life, what God intends beyond our personal restoration, is the renewal of creation. The passages conclude: 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. Our

Comfort is this: God heals and restores, and in fact, saves us, from the chaos and suffering of our human lives, and make us part of the renewal of the world. When or where in your life has the Divine Comfort touched you and transformed it into the source of joy?

Some 500 years later, in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus uses these very words of Isaiah as a platform to launch his ministry; Isaiah's words defined Jesus' ministry: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. Jesus announced himself to be the good news, the embodiment of God's loving intention for God's creation.

And in order for this Jesus to enter into the world, a young woman answered the call to be, quite literally, the vessel of God's intention for the world.

Today's Gospel passage Kristy read for us is a song that is known as Magnificat, from the first word of the song in Latin. The choir just sang it for us, and we will sing again next week. The song is on the lips of Mary, the would-be mother of Jesus, but the song was actually inspired by another song by another woman in the ancient Israel, Hannah, the mother of Prophet Samuel. In ancient Israel, women's value and respect hinged upon having children. Hannah was the wife of a man called Elkanah, but because she could not conceive, Elkanah's other wife with children looked down on her and gave her a hard time. So, Hannah prayed ardently to God to give her a son. When God did, she sang this song of rejoicing and thanksgiving to God for the birth of her son Samuel.

But both Hannah and Mary's songs are so much more than rejoicing in the gift of a son; they go on to sing the praise because of what God does, turning the world of injustice on its head and reversing the way of the world. What God did for them was only a beginning of what God would do for the world. Mary's rejoicing is not that she was given a son, but that she will be used for God's purpose. Mary became the entry way for the Love of God into the world, to bring healing and restoration.

Curiously, Mary's song is written in the past tense, even though Mary is praising God for what God will do, through the son she will bear. In Greek that the song is written, this particular form of the past tense is used to state something that is timelessly true. This about our God, who reverses the unjust world order, bringing comfort to those whose been robbed of life and bring

their lives to become a joyous shout, is the timeless truth, attested in the Hebrew Scripture and throughout the New Testament. It is the truth of our lives.

They rejoiced because God is changing their lives, and when God effects change, it's not only for our individual liberation, but our transformed lives play a part in God's larger plan for the world, liberation of all people from whatever that's keeping them captive, healing of all wounds, and restoration of all relationships that the world might come to know God's peaceable kingdom.

When my husband died, almost 9 years ago now, one thing I knew for sure, was that I would never know joy again. I was still a person of faith, and I knew I would continue to live, and that God had work for me to do as long as I had breath on this earth. But I didn't think I would find joy again. Life without him tasted like food without salt. I would wake up and be ready to do God's work, but I had ceased to believe that God still wanted me to live a joyful life. I was a faithful and at the same time skeptical servant of God; faithful in that I trusted God's love for the world and that God would give my life meaning as I offered myself for God's work; skeptical in that somehow the joy God intended to fill the world with, the very work I was to help God with, that exuberant joy, like the one we heard in Isaiah or in Mary's song, was also for me.

In the years that followed, God placed before me many opportunities to serve people and communities in a way I wouldn't have been able to, had I not experienced the loss of my husband, like being with the sick and the dying, and keeping company with those who are losing, or have lost their loved ones. Even though I was still numb from grief to feel any joy, I knew, I had tasted the deep and abiding presence of the Spirit of Comfort in my darkest days; sometimes it came to me through the acts of kindness and compassion of my friends and colleagues, and other times, just a quiet sense that the Spirit of God was with me and with the dying. And that experienced allowed me to connect with others in their suffering and loss. And when my personal pain and wounds were able to touch the wound of others, there came, surprisingly a joy. The sadness and grief don't go away; I still get very sad, especially when something of my husband that I was holding onto for comfort gets broken or lost, I feel the sadness all over again. I'm not good at letting go at all. But I also know I'm being carried in a much more powerful force of God's intention for joy, for me, for you, and for the world. With the words of Comfort,

turning the life I declared joyless into a life of deep and abiding joy. Comfort, and then Joy. May you find your life carried in this timeless rhythm of life this Christmas. Amen.