

“How Joy Increases”
December 13, 2020

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

Restore our fortunes, O Lord!

In these days the psalmist speaks for us. This is our cry, this is our prayer.

So many things have gone so terribly wrong in so many ways this year. I don't need to spend time rehearsing all that worries us and wearies us from the time we wake up in the morning until we go to bed at night. Nor do I need to list those things that keep us awake or disturb our sleep.

With just eighteen more days to go, we would long for 2020 to be over—except that we don't know what 2021 will bring. There is the uncomfortable thought, however, that the early months will feel more like the 12th, 13th, or 14th month of 2020 than the beginning of a happy and promise-filled new year.

Restore our fortunes!

The psalmist remembers a time when God did just that. The exiled Jewish people held captive in Babylon were allowed to return to Jerusalem. In the wilderness they prepared a way back to their homeland. In the desert they made straight the highway of the God who went before them on their journey toward freedom and a new life. It was as if every valley was lifted up, every mountain and hill was brought low. The rough places seemed to become as plain as they approached the city.

When God restored their fortunes, their changed status was so obvious, so different, that the people of other nations looked and said: “God has done great things for them.”

And the people rejoiced.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord! We have gone out weeping; we have moved through this year in tears. Bring us back. Remember how good things used to be? Make it like that again.

Of course, the songs and psalms we sing can make life seem better than it was.

So let us listen as well as the prophet remembers what it was like when God restored the fortunes of Jerusalem and brought the people back.

At first it came as good news, as a binding up of old wounds, as comfort.

Coming back from exile, however, the people found the city in ruins. The temple was destroyed—they had no place to worship. The walls and gates of the city were torn down—they had no protection or safety. Setting out to rebuild the city, the people worked with tools in one hand and weapons in the other. Nehemiah described it this way: “We prayed to God—and set a guard as a protector against our enemies day and night.” What a wonderful piety! Pray—and act!

Hope and comfort are not an invitation to rest. They are a call to be alert and to repair, rebuild, restore, and renew. This is what restored fortunes look like: being on guard, vigilance.

So when we cry out “Restore our fortunes, O Lord!” we open ourselves to new tasks that will require much of each of us and all of us.

When God restores our fortunes, God does not simply bring us back to where we once were with everything as it once was. Instead God charges us with new tasks: restoring the health of the world, rebuilding our fragile and damaged democracy, restoring relationships between people, bringing justice to our land.

We will pray to God, but we will also do the work.

Restore our fortunes, O Lord!

It is in the work that the joy is found.

So here’s my new favorite story of Christmas cheer, of doing the work, and of creating joy.

In North Little Rock, Arkansas—and let’s be honest, this could have happened even in Iowa City—Chris Kennedy and his four-year-old daughter decked out their yard in Christmas splendor. They strung twinkly white lights along the rim of their home and stationed an inflatable Christmas tree and a towering Black Santa on the lawn, next to a colorful, illuminated sign that reads, “JOY.” It was early November, but this year we needed a little Christmas by then. And the people in the neighborhood enjoyed the display, as they had in recent years.

Then a few days before Thanksgiving, the family found in their mailbox an anonymous, racist letter attacking the seven-foot Black Santa on their lawn.

As word of this got out, the executive director of the property owners association condemned the letter and voiced support for the family.

And then the wonderful thing happened. Black Santas starting popping up in lawns all over the neighborhood. One woman said that when she read about the incident, “My first reaction was, ‘Where can I get one?’ ”

So many neighbors have ordered Black Santas that many retailers are apparently running low on supply.

The Kennedys now have two Black Santas on their front lawn after a man from New York heard about the story and shipped one to them.

People have also asked to send donations, and Kennedy redirected all requests to the Ronald McDonald House of Arkansas. Over \$1,000 has been given so far.

And listen to how Kennedy talks about all of this: “At the end of the day, what was meant for evil was flipped for good.” ¹

That expresses our calling—not only during Advent, but at all times—as well as anything else.

Even in the difficult times, God is bringing about new possibility. This creative work takes time. Returning no one evil for evil, seeking the good in all things, can be difficult and challenging. It can also bring joy to the world.

The Psalmist remembers what it was like: “Then our mouth was filled with laughter and our tongues with shouts of joy!” These words have always come as surprising and exceedingly good news.

The fitting response to what God has done is laughter! Not pious, folded-hand prayer, not earnest social action, not serious study. Maybe we'll get around to all of that and more at some point, maybe not. But the first and fitting response is laughter.

No wonder Santa Claus laughs—along with all the saints. Recalling God's wild and unpredictable action, who wouldn't? The divine becomes human—the sublime does the ridiculous.

We laugh.

And laughing, we hope for more—daring to pray with the Psalmist: ‘Restore *our* fortunes, Lord.’”

In Luke's gospel, Mary catches a glimpse of this new possibility and she sings of the new creation which God is bringing about. Her song speaks of deep human hope. Nothing stays the same. This is not simply the restoration of fortune, but the *reversal* of fortune. The weak become strong; the hungry are filled with good things. What seems absolutely impossible is presented to the world as a sign of God's love.

We hear the good news that God is still at work in the world. With courage we learn to wait—to keep awake, to stay alert as we participate in God's new creation.

God's time is not our time, however. So the hope of Advent gives us the strength and courage that we need as we learn to actively wait.

Advent teaches us to actively wait, to be involved fully in this present world with the conviction that God is at work where we are. We will not flinch from the unpleasant realities of the present, but neither will we take them as the final word.

Yes, sometimes we grow weary.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote: “We are all asked to do more than we can do.”² Over and over we discover this in the stories of scripture. Over and over we discover it in our own lives. At some point we come to the limit of our abilities. Just at that point, something—life or circumstances, desire or God—something calls us beyond those limits. Our inability becomes an opportunity for greater achievement. Our worry and fear become channels for hope.

Friends, this is the good news of these days—and really of all days. God is with us.

We move forward in the faith and the hope that even in all our troubles, the God of love whose incarnation we announce—with joy—the God of love is with us. And nothing can separate us from that love.

Let us, then, in the days ahead, once more tune our voices to sing of joy and faith.

Let us train our lives to show love and mercy.

Let us shape our world into a place of healing and justice and peace.

Let us look again with wonder as God incarnate in Jesus recreates our lives.

In the coming year, let us allow God to work among us in surprising and unexpected ways.

In the coming year, let us allow ourselves to learn what it truly means to flourish.

In the coming year, let us allow God to transform what is weak within you and me into new strength.

Rejoice. Along with all of creation, you are loved by God, whose mercy is great, whose compassion is eternal.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2020/12/03/black-santa-solidarity/>

² Madeleine L'Engle, *Miracle on 10th Street*, pg. 71.