

## THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT | DECEMBER 13, 2020

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11 | PSALM 126 | 1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24 | JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

For the past week or so, I've been reading Eric Jay Dolin's new book on the history of hurricanes in America. A history of hurricanes sounds pretty boring because they just come one after the other with no narrative arc. But the book is really about people and how they come to terms with the forces of nature. Because we have the benefits of modern science, we know how hurricanes develop, how they pick up speed, and where they're likely to go. If there's so much as a slight breeze off the west coast of Africa, CNN will let you know. But for the vast majority of American history, people had no way to know where hurricanes were going, when they were arriving, and no good understanding of what exactly hurricanes even were in the first place. How do people live with that level of uncertainty about the future?

One common answer is that you just ignore it. In the nineteenth century, Galveston, Texas was quickly becoming the most important city in Texas thanks to its shipping industry. As the city grew, people started wondering if they should start building infrastructure to dampen the impact of hurricanes. After all, the highest elevation in the city was just four feet above sea level. But the city's leaders reassured people that it was unlikely if not outright impossible that they would ever be hit by hurricane.

The hurricane that hit Galveston in 1900 is the worst natural disaster in American history. It killed at least six thousand people, about a sixth of the city's population. As you can imagine, the stories from the storm itself are harrowing. But the really chilling part is the next day. When the sun rises over the ocean, the sky is a perfectly blue, and the entire island was covered with wreckage. If you look at pictures from that day, you can't even see the ground because there are so many layers of wood strewn over one another. And so the people wonder, *Now what?*

That's the sort of situation the Israelites found themselves in in today's reading from Isaiah. They had just returned from exile in Babylon. The worst of the disaster was behind them. But Jerusalem is a shell of its former self. The temple is leveled. Their homes are gone. The city is just debris. When they were in Babylon, all they wanted to do was get back home. But now that they're back home? It's kind of a disappointment. It turns out that you can go home, but you can't go back to the way things were.

Try for a moment to imagine what they felt like when they arrived. Disappointment. Regret. Guilt. You probably know some of those feelings. And I don't have to give you the full list of all we've been through this year for you to identify when you've felt each of those.

The temptation for those Israelites and for us is to give into hopelessness. Managed decline. Decadence. Resignation. Faced with the trauma not of loss but meaninglessness, it's easy to imagine the Israelites asking the same thing the crowds ask John the Baptist. "What then? What now?"

Today's reading from Isaiah is the prophet's answer. The prophet declares that God "has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion."

The prophet declares that this life that seems shapeless, pointless, not headed in any real direction, actually *does* have a direction to it. That God is about to do a radically new thing in this place in and through and with these refugees. Whenever God's people start to give into resignation and nihilism and cynicism, God's prophets call their attention back to God's promised future.

There are two particular things going on in this passage that we should be aware of to keep this from devolving into just shallow optimism. First, notice that the prophet declares the "year of the Lord's favor." In the Torah, Leviticus 25 to be exact, God proscribes that after forty-nine years, there will be a reset. Debts will be forgiven. Lands will be reassigned. Prisoners will be released. That year will begin with the blowing of a trumpet or *ybl*, which is why we call the year of the Lord's favor the jubilee year.

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The jubilee year was a way of reordering society. The jubilee year didn't mean that society would always be free of inequities and injustices, but it meant that everyone had a reasonably fair shot at getting ahead. That poverty wouldn't be passed down from generation to generation. And, for a group of people who emerged from slavery, it was a reminder. Jubilee is a practice like sabbath. You do it to remind you of how God brought you out of slavery and sustained your life. Jubilee prevents you from thinking that you're self-made and keeps you from thinking that if you get enough money, you won't have to depend on God anymore.

Jubilee is hard. There is a reason why lots of people practice sabbath but very few people practice the jubilee year. Divesting yourself of that much power and privilege, not to mention money, is hard to get your head around. Which is why the second thing Isaiah does is so important. Isaiah and the exiles rebuild this society not by trying to guilt trip them into doing the right thing, but by bringing people "good news." If you translate this literally, they do it by *gospeling* people. People are only willing to participate in the jubilee year, they are only willing to give up so much, they are only willing to reorder society, if they believe something better is coming in the future.

Instead of trying to shame people into doing the right thing, Isaiah proposes something different. We don't remind people of who they're not, we remind them of what they can be. The way to rebuild, to order, to shape our common life is not to coerce people into better behavior, but to make the vision of God's promised future so vivid, so tangible, so apparent that it changes how we live today. After all, how much of our self-centeredness would evaporate if we believed there were enough for all?

And that jubilee is what we wait for this Advent season. After all, if this story sounds familiar, it's because it's in a famous story from St. Luke's gospel. Jesus reads this scripture in his hometown synagogue and says, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Before Jesus brings good news to the oppressed and binds up the brokenhearted and proclaims liberty to the captives, he tells us exactly what he's going to do. People, get ready. Jesus takes on Isaiah's mission as his own and rebuilds not just a city, but all of creation.

Isaiah's jubilee and Christ's jubilee is our jubilee, too. The "me" in this reading is Isaiah, sure. But it's you, too. Because the Spirit of the Lord is on you. The Lord has anointed you. That jubilee is what we live out every day when we trust in and live out our baptisms. Whenever you resist the old ways of doing things, whenever you bind up the brokenhearted and bring good news to the oppressed and release to the prisoners, you are declaring the year of the Lord's favor. You are shaping our common life according to the design of God's great love.

We wait in hopeful expectation for the one who is to come. And in the mean time, let's get started.

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