

Isaiah 61:10,11; 62:1-3

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 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.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Luke 2:25-32

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

Galatians 4:4-7

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.

Twenty-four years ago, Steve and I planted a sapling oak tree in our back yard to commemorate the birth of Elizabeth and Evan, our first two grandchildren. Seven more grandchildren came along in succession, and the tree has become a continuing reminder of each of them, true blessings whom the Lord has planted in our lives. Today, the tree is a magnificent marvel. Its gigantic dimensions, enduring strength, and dense shade are not only beautiful, but also a welcome relief during a hot summer day in New Mexico. The tree is a sign of the LORD's blessings and glory, displayed for all to

see.

We may think that an oak tree's life expectancy of 300-500 years is incredible; and yet, in God's eyes it is but an instant. His covenant with the Israelites is promised to "one thousand generations," a metaphor meaning "forever." Isaiah has been anointed by God to the task of proclaiming the good news of salvation, and a time of the Lord's favor. The LORD further promises to bring liberty, joy, gladness, and praise to those who are discouraged and have lost hope.

The leadership and the people of Israel have been given a second chance. After living in exile, the people are finally able to return to their country. They have dreamt of this moment; they expect to find the city of Jerusalem that their parents and grandparents have told them about, a splendid and royal city. What they find is a city in ruins.

Isaiah encourages the people not to lose hope, but to dream new dreams, to remember what God has done and what God can do. He tells them, Look at nature! As the earth puts out its growth and as a garden grows its seeds, so the Lord God will grow righteousness and praise before all the nations. Creation is doing what the creator has commanded! The creator has no plans to keep silent or sit still. God feels their disappointment and disheartenment, but he reminds them, they can dare to have hope. They can dream and feel excited. They can raise their voices in praise because God will work with them so that nations can see their righteousness and kings their glory. Their praise is our praise; their hope is our hope.

In Luke's gospel, the hope of Simeon is deep and abiding because his faith is devout and unswerving. He has continued to dream of this day even despite disappointments during his long life; yet he has never doubted the word and promise of God. He is "guided by the Spirit" as he rushes to the temple to witness this Savior for all people. He is ecstatic and full of praise for the things God has done. He is overjoyed that this child has now been revealed to him before he dies. It is all he has hoped for; he has no regrets. Through the Christ Child, God is once again redeeming Jerusalem. For Simeon, hope is eternal, for it is hope that is grounded in the faithfulness of God.

There is a difference between fresh-faced optimism and deep, abiding hope.

"Optimism is based on the possibilities of things as they have (already) come to be; hope is based on the possibilities of God irrespective of how things are. . . Hope is grounded in the faithfulness of God and therefore on the effectiveness of God's promise."

We can still find abiding joy in life, even when things go awry. Even when we become separated from loved ones through death or lost relationships. Even when we can't discern the future. The key element that brings us to true hope is a devout faith that will withstand disappointment, spiritual emptiness, intangible thirsts, and longings – to grow spiritually into a mature, practicing faith that includes Bible reading, prayer, confession, and self-reflection tested in the teachings of Christ. Christ is our hope.

In this first week after Christmas, and in the New Year, we must not lose sight of the Christmas praise and hope we have so recently experienced, because it is still here -- Christ is born -- for us! We experienced the joy of our Salt and Light children the week before Christmas as they presented a 'revised' Christmas Pageant, "Journey to Bethlehem" in this sanctuary. Because Beth lacked a full cast of reliable characters – which was a challenge she could not control -- and three little girls asked Ms. Beth if they could be the Three Kings this year, she enthusiastically said, "Yes!"

Acknowledging reality is a sign of hope for good things to be fulfilled, regardless of the depth of the challenge. This is a very small example to pose to you, of course; but the point is, when we trust that God is working for good, and we are faced with some kind of hurdle, creative change opens the doors of new possibilities.

Accepting, even embracing change, can be a powerful source of transformation, that recognizes the essential, most salient ideas or practices to keep and also the least salient ideas or practices that should be tossed. We take the “what is” – the constant or unchangeable -- and work within cooperation and ingenuity to express the essential truth. When we accept and consent to things we cannot change, we are saying “Yes” in an ever-changing world. In the end, we had lovely music sung by the children that told the nativity story; Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus in his mother’s arms, shepherds, angels, a donkey, a cow, and a lamb, and the cutest set of three Kings we have ever seen. There was no greater gift to us that night!

This Christmas Child, Jesus, sows the seeds of transformation by his Spirit. By grace, he calls us in this church to acknowledge and accept needed change. And as we sow our seeds of change to accommodate a new reality, we hope that such grace will rise and walk among us in an endless stream that is to be received and shared, as a Christmas gift for all. In this way a beautiful vision of a glorious garden that grows and prospers to maturity will be realized.

In Galatians, Paul has been sent by God to redeem all the Gentile nations among God’s people, those who still worship false gods and idols. The focus of God’s plan for redemption is now in place for all, for Paul writes in Chapter 3.28, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, man or woman . . .” He has written his letter to the Galatians to counter false claims against Christianity, which say that circumcision and other Jewish laws are requirements for conversion; but Paul stands to remind the Galatians that, because of the sacrifice of Jesus, they are no longer bound by the laws of men; but are now free to experience the joy of salvation by faith. Grace by faith, unearned yet freely given; set free to be adopted as children into God’s family, and to be blessed as heirs and transformed into a life of freedom to serve only one Master. God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts so that we are no longer slaves to the man-made laws but heirs to hope in Christ. We can regard our Father in heaven as “Daddy,” in an intimate relationship that grows and blooms into a right relationship of love, and trust, and willing obedience. The dream fulfilled is that of a loving Father, bestowing words of wisdom on his children through the Spirit.

In Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, he reminds the people, “clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

To “put on Christ” means to be sanctified, or cleansed, as in baptism. It is an image of sinful humanity being clothed in the salvation and righteousness of Christ. Righteousness is not something inherent to humanity but something granted by the grace of God, prepared in Christ Jesus. We do not deserve the blessing, but it is there for us because of the eternal love of God.

Isaiah’s prophecy is a description of each generation’s proclamation that we not only have been blessed in the present, but also will be continually blessed. We are clothed with salvation and covered with the LORD’s robe of righteousness as we grow from saplings into strong and mature trees, dense with the foliage of faith, and mature, steadfast faithfulness that reaches out to our neighbors, allowing us to nurture one another in community and praise God with our whole lives.

Simeon, a mature, Spirit-filled man whose sense of hope has guided his footsteps throughout his life, dares to dream of the joy of seeing salvation, and finally embraces the Baby Jesus with open arms.

Paul helps us to recognize our ties to the whole human family of God and our responsibility to act in his name as the children and heirs of salvation, fully grounded in the Spirit of Christ as our guide.

As we recall the intricate design and immense faithfulness of God as told through Isaiah, Luke, and Paul, we can see that God's timeless covenant surely provided for the Anointed One, Christ our Lord. It is Jesus who was handed a scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue and who read from Chapter 61, and then proclaimed that the scripture had now been fulfilled. Jesus' mission on earth to bring good news to the oppressed had begun. All joy and praise be to our Lord and Savior, both now and for a thousand generations.

Holy and Eternal God,

Your steadfast love astounds and yet graciously assures us of receiving the joy of your salvation. May we continue to be your faithful and blessed people, fulfilling our call to proclaim the good news of Jesus by living in hope and joy, offering your grace to whomever we meet, and bestowing thankfulness and praise upon your name. Amen.