

“RECLAMATION PROJECTS”
Isaiah 61:14, 8-11; John 1:6-8; 19-28
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Part I: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, for God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, to provide for those who mourn in Zion.”

The distance was almost 400 miles straight across the Arabian peninsula from Babylon to Jerusalem. Yet the people had walked it uncomplaining. They walked through narrow mountain passes and along the dusty plain, fording the great rivers of the East at the beginning, daring the equally daunting desert near journey’s end. The people sang as they went, the songs of their ancestors, and they told the old stories handed down now for three generations of exile. “My family were merchants in the city.” “Mine farmed in the Jordan Valley, dates and olives and beautiful shady pomegranate trees with their bright red flowers in the spring and their sweet tart fruit come fall.” The journey had taken almost three months, but now as they dropped from the Judean hills onto the wide plain north of the Dead Sea, they were almost home. Home. The place none of them had ever seen. The land of their grandparents and great grandparents, known only through story and song, remembrances held close to the heart, treasured and shared from father to son and mother to daughter.

They walked, they ran, they danced those final miles until finally they could see what they had so longed for. And then they stopped short, disbelieving the evidence of their eyes: fields once carefully tended and fruitful had been burned and left wild; orchards trampled; the city with its great walls and beautiful temple now reduced to rubble, a mockery of their every hope. They stood and looked, and as the last of that hope drained from their hearts, they heard the eerie call of the shofar, followed by the voice of the prophet.

Part II: “To provide for those who mourn in Zion: to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.”

I went to college with a man named Andrew. He had grown up in a wealthy family in suburban New York. From the outside, everything of Andrew’s life spoke of ease and privilege. But the inside had been quite different, something I learned a decade later, when Andrew and I met by coincidence at a Medical Ethics conference. Andrew was now a doctor, successful in his career but nursing the wounds of a second divorce. Andrew and his five siblings were what we would now call neglected children. When the maid was around, the children’s basic needs were taken care of, but the parents simply ignored the children in ways incomprehensible to most of us, got them off to boarding school as young as possible, followed by two month long summer camps. The children barely knew each other, much less their parents. Home, as most of us know it, was a foreign concept to them. I remember Andrew telling me that as a small child he and his sisters ate raw potatoes and onions and, if they were lucky, apples on weekends, because the vegetable bin in the pantry was the only food they could reach, and it would simply not have occurred to their parents to see them fed.

The result of this upbringing, or lack thereof, was a deep sense of insecurity within Andrew: unworthiness and shame that caused him never to trust in relationships and to withdraw before those he cared for could abandon him. It was the pain of his second divorce that moved him finally to seek help, to try to heal the fractures of his heart, to revisit the pain of his childhood in the hopes of reclaiming, or more correctly, claiming for the first time, a self of integrity and value. Andrew was in the midst of that hard work when I met him again as an adult and Isaiah's words call him to mind for me.

Part III:

“They shall be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display God's glory.”

Finally there's my friend whom I will call Ann. Ann is a brilliant woman, a talented engineer, and a recovering alcoholic. She's one of those speakers people love at AA meetings because she has a knack for speaking of the devastation of her past life with wit and humor: the day of her sister's wedding when she passed out and fell into the pool and they had to call 911; the morning she lost her job because after a night of heavy drinking, she slept through her alarm, and didn't show up to take the clients to the airport; the night she drove through the closed garage door of her parents' home. The only story she tells with no humor is of the afternoon she had been drinking at lunchtime, and as she turned right onto a main road, she failed to see a 12 year old on a bicycle, hit the bike, broke the girl's leg—thank God only that—and she turned herself in for alcoholism treatment at the Hazeldon Center in Minnesota, where she went through both primary and extended care: nine months of hard work and reflection, community and carefully safeguarded sobriety. But then it came time for her to leave, go back to her home in Brule, Wisconsin, and see what was left in the wreckage that had been her life. She had some inklings of the task before her. Hazeldon encourages the participation of family and friends at various points of treatment, but Ann had so thoroughly burned her bridges behind her that out of all of her circle of relationship, only one family member—a younger brother—and one old college friend and, extraordinarily, the mother of the young girl whose bike she ran into, this woman a recovering alcoholic herself, consented to take part. I met Ann three years sober, and though she had successfully built a new life for herself, she was only slowly reclaiming the pieces of her past. And once more, over her story, I hear the prophet's voice.

Part IV: “They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined ones, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice. I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.”

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed restoration and healing, the rebuilding of a life and a culture and God's everlasting covenant; he preached all this facing the people from out of the midst of a rubble heap. God is here, he insisted, even in the midst of the devastation of generations. God is here, and God's hand will support your own, God's strength will be added to yours as you rebuild, as you reclaim, as you move forward with your lives. You can do it. You are not alone.

Now most of us, we do not know the experience of being returning refugees to a battered and war-torn land, but still we do know in other ways, both internal and external, the brokenness that seems too large, too overwhelming to fix. It's not a stretch for us to imagine a great nation, its infrastructure crumbling and its internal sense of safety and integrity shaken, and to feel overwhelmed by the challenges ahead. And too many of us are intimately acquainted with the internal landscapes of relationships that have, over the years been shattered or ground into dust, or places in our hearts and lives that we do not show to others

and can barely acknowledge ourselves. The prophet's words are for us as much as they were for the returning Israelites: God is here. God is in those dark and painful places. You can go there. It is safe to sift through the rubble and begin the hard slow work of raising stone on stone, rebuilding, reclaiming, making new.

This Advent season is for preparation. But the preparation God has in mind has less to do with buying presents and decorating our homes and more to do with owning, then working to restore the wholeness and integrity of our lives, and of our communities, of our world which is God's world. "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined ones, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them." These are not empty words, but the wondrous discovery of a people who had been holding tight to the last shreds of their hope. God is here, and what seems overwhelming to us, what seems impossible, well, with God it can be possible.

The Advent word for this Sunday is love. God's love for us. And we need to know and understand that this love of God's, it is not sentimental; it's not warm and fuzzy; many times it is not even comfortable. The love of God for us is God's unshakeable insistence that we are not alone, and that we are capable of far more than we know: with God's help, we can be and do more than we ever expected. And so, therefore, we can go both into our own damaged interior spaces and out into the world, and we can rebuild what is collapsed. We can make new and strong and whole.

So what are you waiting for? The days till Christmas are quickly passing. This season of preparation is more than half spent. What are the reclamation projects of your life? What can you do to contribute to the wholeness of the earth as it awaits Christ's coming? Do it now. Begin today. And believe the prophet's words: that God's love and God's strength will be with you always in the work. Thanks be to God. Amen.