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## **Repairing the Ancient Ruins**

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's  
Episcopal Church on 12-13-20*

*The Third Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11*

In the name of the Holy Trinity, the Beloved  
Community in whose image we are made.

**Amen.**

This is the third week of Advent. Advent is the church's new year, which is all about hopeful waiting. It's that time when we allow ourselves to feel the full force of longing for the kingdom or reign of God—in which God's Great Shalom is the order of the day, a holistic wellbeing for all people, and in which reconciliation between humans and God, and among humans, has finally happened. Advent is about actively waiting for the light of Christ, for the divine to

be realized in the physical gritty practical world of our actual lives and our actual world. And in this time of waiting comes today's [reading from the ancient prophet Isaiah](#), that I hope sounds familiar to you because it's one that Jesus took upon himself as his personal mission statement. It goes like this:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
he 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....  
They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former  
devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.  
For I the Lord love justice...

In this time of Advent and waiting and longing, let's look at this scripture and let it spark our imagination about what really we are waiting for. In order to do that I need to give you some background about Isaiah, so I hope you'll be patient.

The book Isaiah was written over many years about an Israel that was subject to a sequence of empires, Assyria and Babylon and Persia. Isaiah is divided into two main parts: the first half, which is an indictment of Israel—an unflinching statement about how very far Israel had gone from faithfully following the God who had liberated them from slavery in Egypt, the God who had called their ancestors Abraham and Sarah to leave everything they knew to be sojourners in a new land God would show them. Long ago, when Israel had finally become established in the land God led Abraham to,

they had established an empire of their own and had oppressed one another. They had sometimes followed their God but also sometimes followed some other gods including gods that required child sacrifice. They became people of violence. The oppressed had become the oppressor. And so eventually they were overthrown and their cities razed and they were taken into exile, and Isaiah the prophet speaks the Word of God to them without compromise. He will not lie and say everything is OK when it had not been OK, and when in order really to heal they had to face the truth of what they had done.

And the second half of Isaiah, which is where today's reading comes from, is about the healing that God offers to the people of Israel. It's about freeing the captives and giving sight to the blind and healing the brokenhearted and declaring God's favor, God's amnesty, God's

love that is the one thing greater than all else. And in the midst of that healing, God says that they would build up the ancient ruins, repair the ruined cities, the devastation of many generations. It took a long time to do that much devastation and harm, and yet, God says, they would become people of restoration and repair, rebuilding and renewal.

And I'm really interested in that move of restoring and repairing, rebuilding and renewing. I'm interested in it because as you know, we are at a flexion point in our church and our city and our nation. The pandemic has kept those of us who are privileged enough to be able to be safe isolated from one another. The nation is going through what I hope is its last efforts to contest this bitterly divided election. Our church St. John's has discerned the Spirit's call to center the work of racial justice and healing, after the murder of George

Floyd a few miles from our building woke us up to recognize the harm systemic racism has caused for centuries, the devastation of many generations, in our own city. So what does restoring, rebuilding, repairing really look like?

When Israel rebuilds, what will it do? Will it just try to “Make Israel Great Again?” Will they go back to the way things were, back to “normal”? What is the relationship between the old and the new? When we go back to our building, will we just pick up where we left off, to the same sequence of three services, to business as usual? When Joe Biden is inaugurated president, will he declare peace and unity and compromise, and politics as usual? As we seek to be faithful followers of the Jesus whose nonviolent love was so healing and uncompromising and radical, what will that mean about our efforts to allow ourselves to be converted by the gospel, when we talk about

racial justice and healing?

Some of you know that we have recently started two new small groups at St John's. One is a "spiritual bootcamp in the wilderness" in which we're deeply exploring the connections between Jesus' Way of Love and our own lives, and the other is "Sacred Ground," a film-based dialogue series about race. As part of the spiritual bootcamp group, each of us as individuals went through a process to identify five themes that describe who we are at the core, and also who we believe God is calling us to be. These themes are like the prism through which the light of God shines through each of us uniquely. One of my themes is "healing justice," that involves nonduality and nonviolence. Nonduality has been important to me, as I was raised in an either/or Church that said you were saved or you were damned, you could believe this way or no way, you were in

or you were out. And I've appreciated that the Episcopal Church is generally a both/and, not an either/or church. But having said that, if I'm honest, I have to admit that there are times in the Bible, in the life of Jesus, where nonduality seems a stretch. The Bible is full of division, and some of it seems insisted upon by God. The prophet Jeremiah speaks a scathing word of judgment in Jeremiah 6:14 when he says, "They have healed the brokenness of my people superficially, saying, 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace." Jesus said in Matthew 10:34, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword." As we talk about the gospel, the good news of God in Christ, the healing and repairing and restoration of the ancient ruins and the devastation of many generations of racism, how do we know when to speak peace and when the truth admits no peace, not yet?



The Reverend William Barber II preached recently at his church, Greenleaf Christian Church in North Carolina, on the topic “[The Division that is Necessary for Healing and Unity.](#)”<sup>1</sup> He said this:

The systems and the values of the world are so different than the values of the gospel that when the gospel shows up there is a division that comes, and it is not a bad thing, but a necessary thing, in order for repentance to happen, and true healing and unity to occur with God...Peace cannot simply be a desire for the absence of tension... If the gospel doesn't ever challenge our natural way of thinking then it's not the good news, it's not the truth.

The gospel is always radically good news in the end, but it may not seem like good news to begin with. The justice that is healing begins with a humble willingness to recognize and tell

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<sup>1</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXqHIF3ku-E&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXqHIF3ku-E&feature=emb_logo).

the truth. We become willing to tell the whole truth about the vast gulf between our aspirations and our reality as a church and as a nation when we recognize that what we have been doing isn't working, but God has a way for us. That way involves honesty, repentance, and following Jesus to restore the ancient ruins and repair the harm that has been done. We can have courage to make this journey when we come to trust that our God really is a God for whom not one person is expendable, neither the 666 Central American children who have been not only separated from their parents but lost in the system, nor the border workers and politicians and voters who made that monstrosity happen. God really is a God for whom not one person is expendable, neither the people who have left the church because they see it as morally bankrupt nor the people who love the church exactly as it is and don't want it to change at all. For God not one person

is expendable, not the people who have died from COVID even when it could have been prevented nor the people who wouldn't do what could have been done to save their lives.

Some of you know that I am on the Episcopal Church in Minnesota's Racial Justice and Healing Discernment team, and I'm on the subcommittee that talks about systemic change in the church and about reparations. The word reparations is a loaded word. People have all kinds of feelings about it. But we are talking about the same word that was used in the prophet Isaiah today, repairing the ancient ruins, restoring the devastation of many generations. We are talking about what Jews call *tikkun o'lam*, the restoration of all things that is the vision of Scripture and the God of passionate, prophetic justice who wills healing for all. We are talking about Jesus' own mission taken from this very passage in Isaiah, the

mission that describes good news to the poor, liberation for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free and declaring the year of the Lord's favor. We follow a simple itinerant prophet Jesus, who gave his life rather than compromise on insisting that love of God, love of neighbor is the dividing line between the status quo and the dream of God. Although I believe in that God will ultimately reconcile all things, and that nonduality is a helpful way to transcend our usual either/or thinking, I also know that we are always called to tell the truth, not to compromise about insisting on sacrificial love. If there is a necessary division in order to achieve unity and healing, that division is not the political aisle. It's the difference between selfish apathy and tolerance of the status quo which harms so many people, on the one hand, and for us on the other, a willingness to follow Jesus' Way of Love no matter the cost to us.

The cost, even if it is steep, is worth it because we are called to rebuild the ancient ruins, to become repairers of the breach. The cost, even if it is steep, is worth it because it is about real human beings and other living things, whose worth is beyond calculation, beyond price.

Whatever 2020 has been, let 2021 be the year of God's favor, God's amnesty. Let it begin this day, this minute. Let us not declare peace when there is no peace, let us not seek to go back to sleep or try to go back to normal or seek to make things great again when there was always a gulf between the aspiration and the reality. Let us instead become people who follow Jesus' Way of Love no matter where it leads, not matter what it costs, no turning back.

