

## **“Trading Ashes for Garlands”**

Sermon Preached by Rev. Young-Mee Park

At First United Methodist Church of Oak Park

December 11, 2011/ Third Sunday of Advent

Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Psalm 126, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28

*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, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 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. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. 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, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. 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. (Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11)*

As early as the 4th century, Advent was kept as a time of fasting in preparation for Christmas. It was as strict as Lent, and as long as Lent -- forty days. A few centuries later, its duration was shortened to four weeks. But, forty days or four weeks, the meaning and purpose remained the same – Advent was, and has always been, a season of penitence, abstinence, and preparation. I don't know since when, but now, at least in this part of the world, keeping Advent has become a profoundly counter-cultural act. The world around us is trying so hard to make us believe that it is a season of baking, shopping, decorating, and indulging ourselves. But, we, the believers, defend Advent. We refuse to buy any of that nonsense that Christmas is something we can buy with our credit cards and that Advent is a time just for that. Instead, we claim the truth of Advent. We make Advent spirituality a basic component of our lives, especially during those four weeks before Christmas, but also throughout the year. With contrite and repentant heart, we look deep into the dark corners of our lives. In humility and reverence, we open ourselves up to the presence and power of the Holy. Patiently and actively, obediently and creatively, we wait. We wait for the coming of Christ, the Savior of the nations.

One of the ways in which we mark the progression of the season is the Advent wreath, with four candles around the center. The first candle is lit on the first Sunday of Advent. During each subsequent week, an additional candle is lit. We are midway through the season now. We added the third candle today. Did you notice that that third candle had a different color? In addition to two purple candles, we lit a pink candle today. A mixture of Advent purple and Christmas white, rose signifies that Advent is more than halfway over, that the Lord's coming is

near, that we can continue our waiting, with contrite and penitent heart, but also with an added sense of joy and gladness.

The lessons put before us on this third Sunday of Advent overflow with joy. In our first lesson, Isaiah the prophet shouts out: *“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness.”* (Isaiah 61:10) The psalmist also bursts into laughter and joy, *“The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.”* (Psalm 126:3, 6) In our epistle lesson, Paul writes, *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”* (1 Thessalonians 6:16-18) Yes, today is “Rejoice Sunday.” Joy is definitely the theme and the mood. Salvation is near! Restoration is near! The Lord is drawing nigh! The dawn is at hand!

Beautiful and hopeful words, are they not? Yet, we have to acknowledge, not all of us are in that rosy, pink mood. Not all of us are seeing the light appearing in the sky. Not all of us are in the mood for rejoicing. Many are struggling in this tough economic time. Many are struggling with health problems or life change issues. Many ache for those absent. Many suffer from broken relationships and fractured lives. The holidays rarely bring pure joy. The memories of past, however sweet they may be, also brings memories of difficult and painful times. Where is joy? We wonder. How can we rejoice in these times of trouble and deepening darkness? How can we rejoice in this world stricken with poverty, war, conflicts, and inequities of all sorts? We live in a world of justifiable fears and apprehensions. It seems that nothing is more radical or more counter-cultural than to live with joy, gladness, praise, and thanksgiving.

Yet, the prophet proclaims; the psalmist exclaims; and the apostle claims -- joy. And we are mistaken if we think that their world was different from ours, that they lived in a world that was much more peaceful and affluent than ours. On the contrary, people were in great distress, in Isaiah’s time, under all powerful Babylonians, in Jesus’ and Paul’s time, under the brutal subjugation of the Roman Empire. Theirs was not a rosy world. No, not at all. Their city, Jerusalem was in need of being rebuilt, just like some of our cities and towns, here in this country and around the world are today. Yet, the prophet proclaims; the psalmist exclaims; and the apostle claims joy, the joy of righteousness, the joy of salvation, the joy of the Lord’s favor.

You see? Their joy was not of this world, and neither is ours. No, we do not find joy in the frantic pushing and shoving of a department store on the so called “Black Friday.” No, we do not seek joy in the endless strolling of the shopping mall corridor in this holiday season. Joy is not a commodity; it can not be purchased with our credit cards, nor can it be attained through cheap entertainment. Our joy does not reside in a distraction from our painful and stressful lives. No. Our joy comes from God – God’s abiding presence, God’s sustaining grace, God’s power to redeem the past, restore the present, and re-imagine the future. Our joy comes from the Spirit, who anoints us to do God’s work – bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. Our joy comes from God’s once-and-for-all gift of Jesus -- Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth, dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

So, standing on our tiptoes, we light another candle today, the candle of joy. We trade our tears for laughter, ashes for garlands. Standing on our tiptoes, we sing the joy of our longing heart today. Come, thou long-expected Jesus, come! Amen!