

Saved from Despair

Isaiah 61

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The movie “Groundhog Day” has been around for a couple of decades and has become kind of a modern classic. Bill Murray plays a weatherman named Phil who has gone to cover the annual groundhog prediction in Puxatawney, PA. He and his crew get snowed in. When he wakes up the next morning, it’s *not* the next morning, it’s still Feb. 2—Groundhog Day. He keeps living the same day over and over.

In one scene, he’s in a bar talking to a couple of guys. He asks, “What if every day is the same as the day before and nothing you do makes any difference?” One guy says, “That sounds like my life.”

That may sound like a lot of people’s lives—people who are bored with life, who are stuck in some rut. Nothing really changes. It’s kind of like living the same day over and over. Living that way leads to despair.

In the movie, Phil tries living without restraint because there is literally no tomorrow. But soon he gets bored. Then he feels trapped and hopeless. And he starts to despair. He tries to kill himself several times, but each time he does, he wakes up again on Groundhog Day.

The message of Isaiah 61 comes to people on the edge of despair. Listen to the words used to describe the people: poor, brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, those who mourn and grieve, ashes, mourning, despair, shame and disgrace. Some or all of those words could describe any of us at different times.

The situation this passage addresses is some time around the end of Judah’s exile in Babylon. It appears that the people have returned to their homeland. But the restoration of glory has not come as they expected. Most of Jerusalem and the land are still in ruins. Many of the people are not able to make it financially. They’re distressed and depressed.

Good news comes into that situation. Listen to what’s said at the beginning, look who brings good news. “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me....” One who is anointed—given

power and authority—by God with the Holy Spirit brings a message to these despairing people.

This anointed one sounds like the Servant of the LORD described earlier in Isaiah. Whoever he is, his mission is to proclaim good news. He has a word from God for the people.

A recovering alcoholic got in a fight with his wife. Then he took off in his car, intending to get drunk. As he drove, his phone rang. He figured it was his wife, either continuing the fight or apologizing. But when he answered the phone, it was his A. A. sponsor calling and saying, "I've been thinking about you the last few minutes. What's wrong?" The man driving said, "Hello, God." His friend said, "No, this is Bill." Then the driver explained what was going on and how it really was a call from God (Jim Buskirk, FUMC Tulsa tape). God is calling you. God has a message for you right where you are.

The anointed prophet and servant of the LORD says, "The LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor." Everybody needs God's good news. Perhaps the poor are more ready to hear it because they know how much they need it.

The prophet says, "The LORD has sent me." Now look at what he's sent to do.

To bind up—bandage—the brokenhearted. Or, those with "shattered hearts." That is, people who have lost will and hope, whose world has been destroyed. God, through the prophet, offers healing for people who are thoroughly shattered (John Holbert, *Expectations for the Child?*

< <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Expectations-for-the-Child-John-C-Holbert-12-08-2014.html> > accessed 12/9/14).

To proclaim freedom for the captives—this is possibly people who are in prison for debts and such.

To proclaim release from darkness for the prisoners. In the darkness of depression, despair or sin, God wants to give light.

To proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God. The first part of this sounds like the year of Jubilee in Leviticus. Every fiftieth year slaves were to be set free, debts canceled and land restored to its owners. A new era is coming where God's favor (grace) and

justice rule. The line about God's vengeance may mean something more like the LORD's zeal in action. God will act "with zealous focus to bring about the jubilee" (Holbert).

To comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve in Zion. The mourning here is probably for the exile and the ruined condition of Jerusalem the people found when they returned. But God has comfort for *all* who mourn. We grieve whenever we feel a loss: a loved one dies, a relationship is broken, a friend moves away. A building where we have worshiped for many years is sold and the church moves. Whatever our loss, however we mourn, God wants to strengthen us with his own presence and give us peace.

Though the situation was one of sorrow and despair, shame and disgrace, God had something better for his people:

- a crown of beauty instead of ashes
- the oil of joy instead of mourning
- a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair
- a double portion, an inheritance instead of shame and disgrace

Whatever your sorrow, whatever form it takes; whatever discourages you or depresses you, God has something better. God wants to give you joy instead of sorrow. God wants to set you free to praise him instead of being in despair.

God does this by his word through his Servant. God also leads us into joy and praise by giving us hope and purpose and assurance.

God through the prophet shows the people a vision of the future and gives them hope. "They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.... They will rebuild, restore and renew. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed."

We have joy when we know that God has a future for us, when we know that our future is in God. Not only heaven and eternal life, but our future in this life is in God's hands. God wants us to know that he is in the future as he has been in the past, as he is with us right now. God still has a

vision for our lives. There is still fruit to bear. There is still rebuilding, restoring and renewing to be done in lives, in churches, in communities.

God speaks of what he wants the people to do and gives them purpose. "You will be priests of the LORD and ministers of our God." All of God's people serve him. We know him and help others know him.

The way out of despair into joy and praise is the way of service. We get our eyes off ourselves and our problems and start seeing other people and their needs. We look for what we can do about those needs, what God is calling us to do.

In "Groundhog Day" Phil finally decides to make the most of this one day he has. He starts caring about the people around him and serving them. He starts to love. That becomes his way out of despair (and out of the time warp that has him trapped in Feb. 2).

At our house, we have a collection of children's Christmas books. We started getting them when our kids were young and Nancy likes to use them at school. And, we still just enjoy reading them. One of our favorites is called *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey*. The story is set in the 1800s. Jonathan Toomey is a woodcarver who, after the death of his wife and baby, has moved to a frontier town. He keeps to himself as much as he can. He's isolated, lonely, and depressed. Because no one has ever seen him smile, the town's children call him Mr. *Gloomy*.

One day he hears a knock at his door. He opens it to find Widow McDowell and her son Thomas who have just moved to town. In their move, they have lost the nativity set that her grandfather carved for her. Someone has told her that Jonathan Toomey is the best woodcarver in the valley, so she wants him to carve her a new nativity set.

He takes the job. After a few days, the widow and Thomas show up at his shop again to see how the work is going. She has baked cookies and brought them. She sits and knits while Thomas watches the woodcarver. Thomas tells him that the old sheep looked happy. Jonathan says that sheep can't be happy. "These sheep were, because they got to be near Jesus." Jonathan Toomey stays up all night carving the sheep to get it just right.

Some days later, Mrs. McDowell and Thomas come to the shop again. She sits and knits and he watches Jonathan Toomey work. He wants to learn to carve. Again and again they come bringing home baked goodies. Thomas tells Jonathan what the figures looked like. The cow was proud. He describes the angel, the wise men and Joseph. Thomas loves watching Jonathan work. Each time they come, Jonathan is a little less gruff, his shop is a little straighter, and he has cleaned up a bit. Jonathan Toomey stays up late into the night each time working to get the figures just right.

Mary and Jesus are the hardest to carve. Thomas had described the old figures and how much Mary loved Jesus as she held him. Jonathan sketches and re-sketches what they should look like. He tries to carve them, but he can't get them how they should be. Then he looks through a drawer, rummaging past a tablecloth and a pair of booties, and finds a charcoal sketch of his wife rocking their baby. That picture becomes his model for Mary and the baby Jesus.

On Christmas Eve, Mrs. McDowell and Thomas come to the shop, bringing Jonathan packages and checking to see when the nativity set will be done. Finally, the nativity set is finished on Christmas Day. It's a beautiful, wonderful piece of work. Jonathan Toomey brings it to the McDowell's house. He's wearing the red scarf Mrs. McDowell knitted him and he has in his pocket the wooden bird Thomas had carved for him. When they hear the sound of church bells, the widow McDowell and Thomas invite Jonathan to come to church with them. They leave the house together, laughing and singing. Nobody ever called him Mr. Gloomy again (http://www.amazon.com/Christmas-Miracle-Jonathan-Toomey-CD/dp/0763636290/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1418659701&sr=1-1&keywords=the+christmas+miracle+of+jonathan+toomey).

What if through our coming to the manger and staying there with Mary and Joseph and Jesus we could be transformed? What if our celebrations of Christmas brought us true joy? Could we find healing for old grief? Could we grow closer to the people in our lives and make new friends? These are all gifts God want to give us to bring us out of our despair.

God in this passage speaks of his own character and gives the people assurance. "I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing [or violence—God was opposed to the things that were done to Judah when they were conquered, and he didn't want them treating others that way either]. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them." God's faithfulness would provide permanence in their relationship with him.

As we begin to realize the kind of God we serve, to know something of his character, we are encouraged. We see God most clearly in Jesus Christ, who embodies and fulfills the anointed prophet and Servant of the LORD we see in Isaiah. This Isaiah passage is the scripture that Jesus reads in the Nazareth synagogue at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:16-21). He announces that he fulfills the scripture that day.

Jesus is anointed by the Spirit of God. Jesus brings good news to the poor. Jesus proclaims release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Jesus lets the oppressed go free. Jesus proclaims and embodies the Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor. This speaks of the physically poor and bound and blind as well as the spiritually poor and bound and blind. And, not only is this the agenda for Jesus' ministry, but it becomes the agenda for the Spirit-anointed community of Jesus—that is, the Church. Jesus' agenda is our agenda.

God who comes in Jesus is faithful. And God's faithfulness inspires our faith. We start to have an assurance that God is who he claims to be and we can trust him.

This results in praise. "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God...garments of salvation...robe of righteousness." Righteousness and praise sprout up like in a garden—a place that's tended and cultivated. We have to practice being the kind of people who praise God. We have to develop an attitude of praise and rejoicing.

John Wesley, on his deathbed, sang his favorite hymn:

I'll praise my Maker while I've breath
And when my voice is lost in death
Praise shall employ my nobler powers

My days of praise shall ne'er be past
While life, and thought, and being last
Or immortality endures
(Isaac Watts)

A little later, Wesley told those gathered around, "The best of all is God is with us." He tried to sing the hymn again, but could only gasp, "I'll praise. I'll praise." And then he died.

May God's praise fill our hearts and be on our lips every day of our lives—including the last day. Then we'll be ready to join the chorus that praises God in heaven. That praise, filling our lives, drives out and replaces the spirit of despair.