“***Cause to Spring Up***” by S. Finlan. The First Church, Dec. 13, 2020

[**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=50)

1The 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 broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 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. 4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities . . .

8 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. 9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples . . . 10 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. 11 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.

**John 1:7-8, 19-28**

7 John came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20He confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” 21 They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” 22Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer . . . What do you say about yourself?” 23He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.

24 Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” 26John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

In this Advent season we celebrate the hope, peace, joy, and love that the approaching birth of Jesus brings us. Today is assigned to joy. We started with an Isaiah passage, the same one that Jesus used to announce the beginning of his public ministry, recorded in Luke 4. He reads this passage in the synagogue in Capernaum, adding a line from elsewhere in Isaiah, “recovery of sight to the blind” (Isa 35:5), and then he says “Today has this scripture been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18, 21). Jesus is saying he has been sent to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, and sight to the blind. It is a proclamation about Jesus’ coming ministry, which shows a major shift of emphasis from John’s message. John was an old-fashioned prophet in the pattern of Elijah: strict and moral, with promises of a Judgment Day.

John seems to embody all the sternness from the prophets, while Jesus will embody all the hope and joy. John knows that the Messiah is already out there. He refers to him as one who stands “among you” (John 1:26). And he knows that the Messiah will be different from and better than himself. I don’t know if he knows that the Messiah will show more of love and mercy than he does. He just knows that the Messiah will be more “worthy.”

Jesus brings the oil of gladness, and liberty for the captives. I think that includes those who are captive to judgmental and severe concepts of God, including the notion that God was going to punish all the nations. Most of Jesus’ apostles, and John as well, were captive to these concepts, and Jesus came to liberate *them*. He came to free those held captive by politicized concepts, as well as those oppressed by spiritual blindness. The worst captivity is the *spiritual* and *mental* captivity that we create for ourselves. The hardest prison to escape is our own mental subjugation to bad ideas. But Jesus is the great jailbreaker. He would free us all from fear, and from the judgmentalism and pride that arise from fear. Fear makes us want to *control* things. Judgmentalism is an attempt to control people morally.

Luke doesn’t give us all of Isaiah 61, but presumably Jesus would have read it all, including the parts about comforting all who mourn, giving them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and that great promises about the future: “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” (61:11). Was this part of what Jesus read that day in Nazareth? Probably. Some of Isaiah 61 was fulfilled by Jesus in his lifetime, and some of it has yet to be fulfilled. Obviously, righteousness and praise have not yet come to dominate the lives of the nations. But this promise of spirituality growing the way that things in a garden spring up, is a hope we can hold onto. It gives me joy to know that the experiment with the human race will eventually be a successful one. Jesus will be able to take joy in this *currently* erratic, immature human race when finally he can get us to pay attention to the things that make for peace and joy, not just for a moment but enduring throughout life.

When we cherish the right things, we get on the right track, and when we are on the right track, we partake of the peace and joy and love that comes from God, the loving Father. True submission leads to true joy. Sometimes we have to go through the crashing of some of our hopes, even the crushing of some of our love, but then we rediscover the never-dying love of God, we recall our dedication to the purposes of God, and we recover a deeper joy, a joy that has some sadness in it, like paprika that gives character to a dish. Experience deepens our understanding and our joy.

Have you ever experienced the joy that comes from persevering through sufferings and reaffirming your loyalties? “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you,” Isaiah said (26:3 ESV). It does not mean a life free of struggle, but it means a life where struggle does not dampen purpose. It means you know what to cherish; you know what is important. Trials or suffering can force one to focus on what really matters, and to appreciate what is lovely. Trials tend to make us understand that others have to endure trials, too. Suffering can help one to develop a more compassionate nature.

There was a woman named Ruby who, in her old age, suffered from declining eyesight. But she was happily absorbed in painting, until her fading eyesight prevented her from painting. She then took up woodcarving, for she could hold the wood close enough that she could see what she was doing. This went on for five years. But suddenly, her eyesight declined rapidly, and she became blind almost overnight. She became very depressed and felt helpless. Then she received a visit from her woodcarving teacher, who brought her a lump of moist clay. With the teacher’s encouragement, Ruby began to knead and shape the clay. Her creativity began emerging, and some days later the teacher returned to find that she had created several gorgeous clay sculptures. She became dedicated to making ceramics. She told a friend that she had to lose her eyesight before she could release her internal vision. Ruby considered the loss of her eyesight the greatest gift of her life. She said this to her friend Dr. Wyatt, who wrote a book, *What Really Matters*, which includes this story (pages 17–18; <https://www.amazon.com/What-Really-Matters-Lessons-Stories/dp/0982685521>). Ruby lived out her years happily.

Whether you are suffering now or not, you can determine to keep your mind stayed on God, your heart open to instruction and to creativity. You can take inventory of the things that you value the most. You can seek the oil of gladness, to replace an experience of sadness. You can draw on hope, as John did when he proclaimed the coming of the one who would bring the Spirit. That one *did* bring the Spirit. Let us rejoice and welcome him into our hearts!