

The Promises of Advent

[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)

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I've seen ancient ruins many times, but I've encountered *fresh* ruins, recent ruins, only once so far. It was October 2001, about a month after the September 11 attacks. I was a junior in college outside of Boston, and two friends and I decided to visit Ground Zero in New York City.

So many years later, I can't remember exactly *why* we made this trip. I wanted to see the site with my own eyes, as I had spent some time, mere months before, doing an internship at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Battery Park City, just blocks away from the World Trade Center.

But I don't know what urgency led us to pile into my '89 Honda Accord hatchback on a Friday night and drive across Massachusetts and Connecticut in the dark.

After spending the night in a Midtown hotel room, we got up early the next morning and walked the whole way down to the World Trade Center site, block after block after block.

And as we got closer, the air became heavier with dust and smoke and the stench of burning. In lower Manhattan, an eerie layer of white coated everything: storefronts, mannequins in windows, streetlights, abandoned cars. It was like being in an alternate universe, an alien version of our own planet. Streets that ought to be crammed full were nearly empty, except for police. Police everywhere.

We got as close to the site as the barriers allowed, and I don't have a clear memory of what it even looked like; I just had this sense of enormous, incomprehensible destruction, very close but just beyond the reaches of my vision.

My friends and I had trouble breathing, because the air was so dry and dirty, thick with toxins and the ghosts of all those people who had died. Their faces were wallpapered everywhere, as missing posters or memorials. Feeling helpless and ashamed, for reasons we couldn't quite name, my friends and I bought coffees for police on the block and then trudged back.

I've never seen physical destruction like that in person: neither before, nor since.

I find myself returning to that memory when I read today's passage from Isaiah.

You see, the ancient text today was written for people standing in the midst of ruins. Not ancient ruins, not fossils from some ancient civilization. No, Isaiah means fresh ruins. Still-smoking ruins. Ruins created not by natural disaster but by human disaster.

Isaiah's words were written by and for a people very much in crisis. The people Israel had been driven from their homeland by the Babylonians, and after the trauma of their exile, they are finally allowed back home.

But home is not as they remembered it. Jerusalem has been destroyed and the Temple, the center of their religious and political life, the very seat of God, has been razed to the ground by the occupiers.

So they have no city. They have no Temple. The heart of their community is missing. And to add to the confusion, it should be noted that some Israelites had remained behind during the exile. And now the ones who left and the ones who stayed are trying to reintegrate, to become one people again, but they're like strangers to each other.

The world (as they knew it) is in ruins.

Into this ruination comes the voice of Isaiah, with the following audacious promises:

A chosen one, an anointed one, is coming with a very specific agenda:

- To Bring good news to the oppressed
- To Bind up the brokenhearted
- To Liberate the captives
- To Comfort the mourners and bring joy
- To Help the people rebuild their ruined cities
- To Bless the future generations and the whole earth

This agenda, more than anything else, should remind us: the Bible is not written for the convenience of the comfortable, the powerful, or the wealthy. The Bible's first audience, and its primary concern, are the most vulnerable, the most exploited, the most in pain.

God's priorities, as presented by Isaiah, are pretty clear: To restore. To renew. To heal. To feed. To balance. To share. To rebuild.

Jesus found Isaiah's vision so compelling that he made it his mission statement, quoting it in the synagogue in Luke chapter 4. This is how Jesus understand his own purpose, and what others saw Jesus' purpose to be. He is the bearer of this Good News. He is the living embodiment of this agenda, from the way he enters the world, moves through it, leaves, and re-enters it as the Risen Body of Christ, the church.

Lately it feels like we need this Good News more than ever. I opened this sermon with a description of physical ruins, of the aftermath of violent devastation. I'm aware of many other kinds of ruination in the air recently.

There's the ruination of social infrastructure.. Early Saturday morning, the Senate passed a tax bill dramatically alters the provision of healthcare, education, and social services in our country, the basic relationships and safety nets that help bind us together as a people and help us function as a nation. According to Dr. Rev. William Barber and Dr. Liz Theoharis, public theologians and co-chairs of The Poor People's Campaign, this bill is "one of the most immoral pieces of legislation in our nation's history... an act of gross violence against America's poor to serve the country's richest and most powerful."

In the words of the prophet, *We need a garland for these ashes.*

There's the ruination of political institutions, as the national government continues to operate at a disturbing level of chaos and hostility toward marginalized groups. On Wednesday, our president retweeted a series of anti-Muslim videos posted by the leader of an British extremist group. I believe this should disturb us as Americans, but more urgently, it should grieve us as Christians, as people who pledge to love our neighbor, who promise to see God's image in everyone.

In the words of the prophet, *We need the oil of gladness for this mourning.*

There's the ruination of the widespread realities of abuse and harassment coming, painfully, into the light. I know it is distressing to see beloved icons and leaders fall from grace. I know it is scary to imagine who might be next, and to wonder how, as a society, we move forward. But here's a hard truth: for every famous reputation ruined, there are so many more stories that go untold, so many wounds that are never, ever aired. But something is happening, some sea change, some reckoning, and for our society to really change, at all levels, will require a new kind of moral courage.

In the words of the prophet, *We need the mantle of praise for this faint spirit.*

I could go on. And of course I haven't even named the many eruptions and ruinations unfolding at a micro-level, in our families, our workplaces, our schools, the daily stuff of life.

But here, again, is the Good News: we are in the exact right Season to be facing ruins, be they physical or emotional or political or spiritual.

This is what Advent is all about. Advent is not for the faint of heart. The word "Advent" is taken from the Latin, and it means "coming." Advent is what is called a "liminal" time; this is, it is a time when we are standing on the "threshold" of past and future, between what has been and what is coming. Advent, perhaps more than any other season, captures the tension in our lives between the "already" and the "not yet"; that is, between where we are now and what might be, what we desperately hope for.

Advent is not about having the stuff of our lives all resolved or neatly tied up or perfectly clarified or fixed in one place or finally put to rest. Advent is rather a time when we are invited to stay in that unsettled, threshold place for a season—even if it scares us—instead of going for the easy answer, the quick fix, the distraction. It is a time when we are invited to hold still and let all our uncertainty and not-knowing be what it is.

Isaiah's promises? The promises that Jesus took upon himself? They are written for us too. They are the promises of Advent, and I think they are speaking to *this* Advent loud and clear: the present may be in ruins, but the future belongs to God. And God has very different desires for us, and is waiting for us, ready to help us bring that world into being. The Kingdom of God is close, and no passing moment can bring it any closer. God is ready.

May we be ready, too.

Amen.