

DISRUPTIVE HOPE SERMON SERIES TRANSCRIPTIONS

Christ the King Sunday: Peter Anderson on Acts 2 for November 22, 2020

If someone you knew were to come up to you and say, “I’ve got good news to share” what would you expect them to say? Maybe that she was expecting a new baby. Maybe that he got a new promotion at his job. Or, maybe even that she finished first in a hot dog eating competition. There are any number of things that you might expect someone with good news to share with you. Why, then, would it strike me as kind of odd if that person followed up that statement “I’ve got good news to share” by telling me about Jesus?

Maybe it’s because for me, the situation I’ve described in which someone goes out of their way to tell me about Jesus, outside what I’ve experienced four walls of the church, has been an exception, rather than the rule. This is unfortunate and because people generally haven’t talked to me about Jesus in the public sphere, sub-consciously I’m realizing that I’ve bought into the lie that at best faith is just not something to bring up in polite conversation, and at worst sharing one’s faith is akin to ideological assault.

But if the good news of Jesus really is good news, then to not share it is to rob others of the life-changing, life-altering, eternal gift of God.

Today, as we journey together through Acts 2, it’s my hope that we’re reminded of God’s great gift for all people and that my passion and your passion for sharing that gift will flourish.

A little bit of backstory to Acts 2. Jesus had His earthly ministry, He went through the passion week as we know it and He died. And then the resurrection happened and after that He appeared to disciples and others for a period of 40 days. And then as He was leaving to go up to His Father in heaven He said this to His followers:

Acts 1:8: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Power to do what? “You’ll receive power.” As we’ll soon see, part of the Holy Spirit’s work is to empower people to be bold and effective in sharing the good news of Jesus.

The disciples were told, after they received that message from Jesus and He ascended, to not leave Jerusalem until they received the Holy Spirit.

This is Acts 2 “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.”

They being the disciples. The word Pentecost means the fiftieth day in Greek and signified the Jewish pilgrimage holiday the “Feast of Weeks.” As we’ll soon see, the celebration of the holiday resulted in Jews from all over gathering into a central location in Jerusalem.

Back to Acts 2. “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

“Now there were those staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and

Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

This is an incredible scene. In a multi-cultural area like the Lower Mainland where I live, we can appreciate the barriers that different languages can sometimes be. The Holy Spirit has broken down those barriers so that each person hears God’s message in the language most personal to them.

It’s interesting, though, that although everyone present witnessed the same amazing phenomenon, the response was varied.

This is Acts 2:13-14. Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” Some, however, made fun of them—made fun of the apostles—and said, “They have had too much wine.”

One author writes in response to these two different ways of seeing the same incident, “As is so often the case when God works, many who see it have no clue what is taking place, making light of it. No one should be surprised at such a variety of reactions when God works. Some do not see what God is doing even after it is explained.”

At this point, no matter what their response, the crowd is eagerly anticipating what is going to happen next and that is when the apostle Peter stands up and speaks. It seems only fitting that this message of good news from Peter, fueled by the Holy Spirit be presented in its entirety without interruption and that, to the best of my ability, is what I intend to do. Before that however, I want to mention a few key elements of background info that will help you hear Peter’s message with fresh ears.

Two key words and titles that are paramount to Peter’s message and to the understanding of the Jewish listener are this: Lord and Messiah (or Lord and Christ).

You see, the title LORD was significant for the Jews because it would have referred to God. And throughout Peter’s message he wants to demonstrate that Jesus is LORD and thus that Jesus is God. The Greek word for Lord is *KURIOS* and it means “master” and “ruler.” Peter wants the listener to understand that Jesus is master and ruler over salvation and that Jesus’ authority is equal to God’s own.

The second title that is so important to understand is Messiah or Christ which literally means “anointed one.” In Old Testament this term was primarily reserved for the anointing of a king, and in Old Testament the anointing was done by God...God chooses who the king will be. So David is a perfect example.

Samuel goes through all the sons of Jesse and God says, “not that one, not that one, not that one.” Gets to David, God says, “This is my anointed one,” and Samuel anoints him with oil as king.

Following David the term was often used to describe the anticipation of the king who would lead a renewed people of God. By the time of Jesus this anticipation of God’s anointed one was at a feverish level.

They were expecting potentially a political liberator, who would bring freedom by force if necessary. Think about Palm Sunday. They were waving these palm branches, saying “Hosanna” meaning “Save us we pray”. They were expecting someone to come in and free them from the Romans that were holding them under authority.

Jesus was truly “Messiah” but not the type people were expecting. Victory did not traditionally come through suffering yet it was Jesus death and resurrection that brought salvation. You’ll see

how Peter seeks to contrast an anointed king of Israel: David and the true anointed king of all Jesus.

With that background information out of the way, here is Peter's message of good news from the New Living Translation:

"Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people, Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

"Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. David said about him:

"I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest in hope, because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence."

"Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay. God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, "The Lord said to my Lord: "sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet." Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." Or in some translations, "both Lord and Messiah."

This is the climax of one of the most important Gospel messages ever preached. With these words, the apostle Peter wanted those listening to be absolutely sure that Jesus was the one for whom the people of God had been longing, for whom they had been anticipating, for whom they had been long expecting. The good news for them was this: their wait for LORD and Messiah was over.

What do you live in expectation of? What do you anticipate? What do you long for?

During the pandemic, if I'm honest, I've found myself longing for a vaccine, living in expectation of a return to "normal," and anticipating a day when I no longer have to wear a mask when I go into Walmart.

But as I've been reflecting on the events described in Acts chapter 2, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and Peter's message of hope, I've been convicted. In the midst of all of the upheaval and difficulty presented by life in a pandemic—or just life in general—I've struggled to lean on the powerful working and leading of the Spirit and struggled to live into the reality that the good news of Jesus is "pandemic-proof."

In Jesus, we have a Lord who rules over all, who loves with perfect love and asks for us to follow Him at all costs, promising He is working all things for our good. In Jesus we have a promised Messiah, the Christ, who takes away the sin of the world. Who takes tragedy and turns it into triumph, who transforms sorrow into joy, who saves from death and offers life eternal.

This is how the people who heard the good news that day on Pentecost responded:

This is from Acts 2:37-39, 41: When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.”

The good news is that the good news Peter preached on Pentecost is just as good now as it was then and our world could surely use some good news. There are no shortage of big questions... and no shortage of people claiming to have the answer. But in all our uncertainty, we can be certain of this: “God has made this Jesus—the crucified and risen one who reigns at the right hand of God the Father, who sent the Holy Spirit to dwell among the people—both LORD and Messiah.

Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

Lord Jesus, humbling yourself to be born into this world, living the perfect life and then being crucified for our brokenness so that we can have eternal life, if we'll just tell you that we cannot do it on our own, that we're broken, that we're sinful and that we need You. We need Your forgiveness. You will forgive us and fill us with your Spirit and the promise of life everlasting. This is good news, Lord Jesus. May we embrace the good news for ourselves, not only today, but tomorrow and the day after and day after and day after and be bold to share it with those who need to know. And everyone needs to know. We pray this in your name. Amen.

First Sunday of Advent: Mark Doerksen on 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 for November 29, 2020

Greetings, my name is Mark Doerksen, and I am the Regional Minister for the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. My work includes the encouragement of congregations across those provinces, including the care of pastors within these churches. The churches in my area of responsibility are both urban and rural and range from as far north and east as Gillam, Manitoba, to the southwest portion of Saskatchewan, namely Swift Current. I am from Manitoba originally, and actually reside only a 1/2 hour from my hometown, which is an oddity these days. My wife works for the Government of Manitoba, and our children both attend university and are also employed. It is a privilege and great responsibility to serve in this capacity, and thanks for allowing me to be part of your service today.

As we consider the text, I want you to think about your church community. I wouldn't be surprised that there are lots of good things going on in your congregation, but if you're honest, there are probably some things that aren't all that great. Perhaps there's been some difficulty lately, some people have left inexplicably, or your town is shrinking and so too is your church. Some folks are idealistic when it comes to church, and how relationships in the church ought to be. If the church they are a part of has trouble or issues, off they go to another one, or they quit attending altogether. The passage today, and especially the letter to the Corinthians in general, is realistic about church life, and about a church that had a lot of sizeable issues in it. Some might be discouraged by the letter, but I actually see glimmers of hope within it, and I trust that as we go through this passage, that you will notice this too.

Though the word hope isn't used in our text today, I do believe the message is subversive and implied in this portion of Scripture. It is especially concerned with the church at Corinth, and if you know anything about the church at Corinth, you know it wasn't a mega-church with a pristine witness and multiple campuses.

Historically, Corinth went through some difficult times. The city was destroyed in 146 BC, and it laid waste for about 100 years, until the Romans rebuilt it. It was built as a retirement destination, then, for Roman soldiers, who could move there after 25 years of service, and you could be upwardly mobile in Corinth. It was a port city, in a beautiful location. Some might have seen it as a perfect place for retirement.

Though the city might have been a beautiful spot, Paul focuses on the people that were part of the church. Made up of an assortment of house churches, the church in Corinth was far from perfect. The main issues with the church were conflicts and compromise. The church had leadership problems, they had problems with their congregants, and they had a bunch of social issues that they were concerned about. In fact, 46% of this letter deals with conflicts within the church, and 48% of this letter deals with compromise with secular values. Some of the folks within the church were involved in legal proceedings against other people within the church. There was some incest happening in the congregation. There were other issues involving sexual immorality. They had some trouble navigating pagan temples and practices. And so now I want you to think about your church community again. Not so bad, is it?

Anyway, the church at Corinth was in some serious trouble and needed some serious attention. Paul had visited the region for about 18 months or so as we learn from reading Acts 18. After Paul left, there was some correspondence that happened between the church and Paul, and though there may have been more letters than the two we currently have, we see Paul addressing problems throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, problems that had come to his attention. You might expect, as a result, that Paul would begin this letter by reading them the riot act, or telling them to disband, or what have you. But he does not. Instead, he begins by pointing to God, and to His work through Jesus Christ. In fact, Paul will invoke Jesus' name

many times in just the first 9 verses of this book, and in doing so, begins the letter not by focusing on the negative, but by focusing on Christ's work amidst the congregation. And to these opening, hopeful words of Paul, we now turn.

Paul writes, then, as an apostle of Jesus Christ, one chosen by the will of God for the task at hand. He was not one of the original apostles, described as the original 12 disciples of Jesus, but he was sent out on a mission of church planting by God upon his conversion. This was Paul's way of denoting his authority in writing to the church. The idea of authority was important in the writing of the letter, because one of the issues is that the Corinthians thought of themselves more highly than they should have. So here, Paul signals some authority, and then follows it up in verse 2 by stating that this church actually rightly belongs to God, not to the Corinthians or even himself for that matter. The full verse is even more telling; the Corinthians had been called by God to be His own holy people. The language, of course, is reminiscent of Exodus, of God calling his people Israel into being. The church, called by God, is in fact the people of God, and importantly, their task, just as Israel's task was, to reflect God's character. To be the church, Paul is writing, is a serious matter. And it's also tied to a bigger picture: the Corinthian church was tied to all people everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus. There is a spiritual unity amongst all those who call Jesus Lord, a long salvation history, a narrative that had been forming long before the church at Corinth came into existence. The subtle message here is that the God of history, the God of the Israelites, was interested in the life of the Corinthian church.

At verse three, as the salutation part of the letter comes to a close, Paul uses the expression of "grace and peace." This grace and peace are rooted in God the Father and Jesus Christ, and considering all the issues that Paul would address, I think this adds depth to the meaning of the expression. Grace is God's unearned favour upon his people, and peace refers to wholeness. Paul starts at the most important place, then, when he writes the Corinthians. He points them to God, and especially to the fact that God had, through the work of Christ, doused them with undeserved grace and wholeness.

Paul turns from formal salutation to thanksgiving in verses 4 and following, and again we might be surprised at how gracious Paul is with the church in considering the issues they had. Perhaps like Jonah, I find the salutation and thanksgiving too gracious for this church, but of course, Paul knew better, and surprises his readers with the good he sees in them. Paul begins by stating that whenever he has the chance, he thanks God for the gifts that God gave that particular church. The church in Corinth was known for eloquent words and knowledge, which is fleshed out later in chapter 12 as words of knowledge, words of wisdom, and prophecy and tongues. Paul would later correct the expression of these gifts in the church, encouraging the church to allow love to motivate their actions and the gifts. But here, as Paul begins, he offers straight up thanksgiving for the gifts this church has been given.

Perhaps this is an unusual way to think about your church, and perhaps we're accustomed to only seeing what's wrong with our communities of faith. Sometimes concerns about our churches get the most air time amongst our members, and we hear things such as, "we don't reach out more, why didn't the pastor visit me in the hospital that one day? Why don't we use the Baptist hymnal anymore, why aren't there more young people in our church, and why we don't talk about the Spirit more?" But I'd like you to take a moment to think about your church community and the gifts that our Lord has given it. Can you name them? Are you thankful for them?

I am reminded of the CBWC church in Gillam, Manitoba. You'll remember the name from manhunt from the summer of 2019, when a huge RCMP presence descended upon the town, and they eventually found the bodies of 2 dangerous fugitives that had travelled across western Canada. The town is a hydro town, with about 1200 people there. And our church there is small and without a pastor. Yet I can see in that church the gifts God has given them. The gift of

Christian community alone is a huge gift to that town; their dedication to discipleship and engagement with the town is impressive in that remote location. Their small groups meet consistently and their resources are deeper than some of the “how to” resources I sometimes see offered by publishing companies. They have helped encourage other churches within the CBWC as well. I personally think they are a bright light in a place that’s often dark, and I trust they see their gifts instead of focusing on their remoteness or size or the things they can or cannot do. Paul reminds the Corinth that Christ enriched their community with gifts in the present; and are you thankful then, for the gifts you see in your church presently?

As we think about the gifts our churches have presently, I’d like to draw your attention to verse 7. Here we see a somewhat surprising shift as Paul discusses the spiritual gifts of the Corinthian church. From our North American perspective, we might have expected something a little different from the last line of verse 7. Perhaps we might have expected Paul to say, “Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you reach out to your community missionally.” Or we might have expected Paul to say, “Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you care for each other in your community of faith.” Paul says neither of those things, but instead emphasizes future hope for the congregation. In fact, he says “Now you have everything you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul introduces eschatology here, meaning he’s concerned about where things are ultimately headed. I suspect that most North American churches in reality pay very little attention to the notion that Jesus is returning, never mind doing so eagerly, but it’s important enough for Paul that he includes it here.

So why, then, would Paul include this statement about Christ’s return? I think it has to do with the idea that although Jesus has already equipped the church with gifts for the present, Paul is also reminding the Corinthians that this present age isn’t all that meets the eye. Although Christ had come, died, rose and ascended, we find ourselves in between the times when Jesus has come already, but not yet in full. In other words, Paul reminds the Corinthians that Jesus is coming to make all things right, and they ought to yearn for the day when Jesus returns. Yes, Jesus’ return will include judgement, but because of his work as described in verse 8, his followers will be found free from blame on that day. Acquitted is another word. It’s a remarkably encouraging and hopeful reassurance for the church. In other words, Paul wants them to wait on their tip toes, anticipating the time when they will be found blameless.

Just a word of clarification here. It appears that some folks or some churches think that this might let them off the hook in terms of being engaged in God’s mission now. A popular saying has been that some Christians are so heavenly minded that they are actually no earthly good. That is not Paul’s intent here. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. This future hope ought to impact us presently as it animates us for mission in today’s world. The hope we experience ought to be shared generously.

Finally, at verse 9, Paul reiterates his confidence in these matters because ultimately, God is faithful. Paul intentionally is not putting his confidence in the Corinthians to achieve this, because he knows the church has a lot of growth in front of them. But Paul does know his confidence in God is not misguided, and God will carry this through. God, who has been faithful in the past, will be faithful to do what He has promised.

We’ve seen that the text has reminded us of God’s salvation story in the past, his gifts in the present, but it also has some significant assurance for the future. Theologians call this eschatological, meaning the concern here is that of where things are ultimately headed. It is easy to be discouraged in our current context in North America. There is so much upheaval in terms of culture, society and the church, that it’s difficult to know how to navigate, who to trust, how to respond. It’s tempting to pack up and head to the hills, leave our problem-riddled churches behind, get off grid, Twitter-free, and worry only about ourselves, living in a camper somewhere.

But that is not what we're called to do, if this introduction to Corinthians is telling for us, especially for our communities of faith. When things seem hopeless, when we are discouraged, we turn instead to God, the one who brings to the table a whole extensive library of stories about His faithful actions to his people in the past, rooted in history. We remember that Jesus Christ has equipped our churches with gifts for the present. The gifts in your church will probably look different gifts given elsewhere, but the gifts help us to pay attention to the things Jesus would have us pay attention to. And though we live in a difficult time, we long and yearn for the time when Jesus will come and put all things to rights. This text instills hope in us, that though we may be discouraged by circumstances and behaviours all around us, God remains faithful, equips the church, and promises that Jesus will return and will safeguard each of us until that final day. This is, of course, a much needed passage of hope for our particular time. Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent: Dennis Stone on Psalm 85:10 for December 6, 2020

Wherever you are today, greetings in the name of the Lord God Almighty: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. My name is Dennis Stone and I am the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada Regional Minister for the Mountain Standard Time Zone. My family and I live in Edmonton, Alberta, and It's been a great privilege of mine to be with the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada since 1986. So greetings as well from our Executive Staff as we really live across all of Western Canada, but it's good to be a part of them and I appreciate the staff I work with and I appreciate all of the churches I'm privileged to work with as well and the pastors who pastor among them.

Everything about me though, is unimportant. Today we only have a few minutes to look into God's Word. So let us spend some time looking at the theme of peace. We're going to look at it by looking at peace, and an opposite aspect of peace. Text for today is found in Psalm 85:10. Psalm 85 verse 10.

In the New Living Translation, it reads this way: "Unfailing love and truth have met together righteousness and peace have kissed." In the New International Version it reads this way: "Love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other." In the King James Version, it reads, "Mercy and truth are met together. Righteousness and peace have kissed each other." Appreciate today some of the tension, or the polarity, found within this verse. Righteousness and truth, mercy and love, these are two opposites in the world in which we live.

So how can these two opposing concepts come together? Even to the point of kissing as it says here. You know, we wrestle with truth and justice, and with showing love and mercy all the time. When we're listening to the news, when you hear a story of a court case and what the judgment is, you might think, well, that's just or that's too harsh. And we're evaluating and judging that in terms of how legitimate is.

Those of you who are parents and discipline your children, you wonder. Well, what's the right type of judgment. What's the right type of punishment to meter out. When do I show Grace and mercy and probably if you're like most parenting couples one of you is more like the good cop. One is more like the bad cop. One of you might lean more towards truth and justice, "what's right." and the other would be more compassionate, maybe a little more compliant and gracious. These are the polarities in which we live, but with God I want to say there's always a perfect balance.

When we think of righteousness, we often think of our standing between ourselves vertically—between ourselves and God—thinking of God being the righteous one. But when we think a peace we think often of how we stand with others around us, our world. And I want to say with God as well. When all of that is well, we've got peace in our life. Truth. Righteousness. Peace. If you're a Bible student, your probably familiar with the person of Melchizedek in the Old Testament who was the "King of righteousness" and it could be interpreted "King of Peace." And it's just both of those aspects that's there in Genesis. But it goes through the Scripture, the themes of mercy. And the theme of justice and righteousness.

My daughter and her husband just bought a new home to accommodate their growing family. They have three children, three of my grandchildren: ages 5, 3, and 8 months. I was interesting to be helping them the other day put up the baby gate and as I did so I was trying to help mark the wall where the screws had to go in and had a pencil around. And the three-year-old picked up the pencil when I wasn't watching and he started drawing on the wall. Now he's been told not to do this before. So what happens is of course parents pick him up and take him to his room as a time out: a form of discipline. And the child cries. And as he's crying, I know that. The ache that's there is also there in the parents, and it's also me as the by-standing grandfather. Peace is restored to the child when the parent comes and says OK, your time is up. You can get out now,

and all of a sudden there's sense from them that everything is good. Relationship's back to normal. The punishment's paid. I can just enjoy life again. And that story could be told over and over, probably in about every family that's lived on the earth. Think of discipline and how we worked with discipline and how we show mercy.

But we're going to look at Biblical start that goes far, far, much farther back in time. We're going to look at Moses, who brings the children out of Egypt and there in the desert 40 years. And while they're there, one of the stories should read in Numbers 16 is the story of Korah, who starts a rebellion. And in that rebellion, there's about 250 followers, and then God tells them, tells Moses, tells others, get away from these people, and so they stand away and God swallows them up in the earth. Those 250 people, Korah and his followers. But what's interesting is 10 chapters later in the book of Numbers, there's a story there. There's a verse that says that the *children* of Korah were *not* killed in the desert. And have to wonder if these children live their whole life, maybe with some sense of a stigma from their father, or later their grandfather or later their great grandfather.

Interesting to see that here in the Psalms we have the Psalm written by the descendants of Korah. This is many generations later, of course. It's fascinating how this twist from the one who's rebelling against Moses, the leader of Israel, and now the descendants are people praising God in the Psalms as we find it. These children, as it turns out, become key individuals in the work and service of the Tabernacle. One of them becomes an excellent bread maker—of course there's bread in services of the Tabernacle and in the wilderness—and even later on others become gatekeepers and others become musicians and worship leaders.

There's another great story about Korah and descendants of Korah. During the time of Jehoshaphat, who's one of the Kings of Judah, you have the story of three nations coming together to fight against Judah and Jehoshaphat, and one of the prophets says, you know, “the Lord's gonna fight for you.” So what happens is the sons of Korah are among some of this army is going out to fight these three nations all at once. So what happens is the sons of Korah are among some of this army going out to fight these three nations all at once. It's the sons of Korah who start singing praises to God in the middle of what would normally look like impending doom. Facing just an army that's much more vast than what they are as people of Judah to there at the moment, so they go out on the battlefield and when they get there they don't even have to raise a sword. God works in their behalf. Interesting, the position of the praise people. The descendants of Korah.

The children of Korah, they write about a dozen other psalms and one of them is Psalm 85 where we find ourselves today and that's the verse again: “Love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other.”

Hebrew poetry, the way that poetry is done in in the Old Testament, is not done in a way we do today where we rhyme certain words. For them, they would say a phrase and then they say a second phrase that says almost the identical thing but is slightly different terminology. Which is why you have “love and faithfulness—faithfulness being more along the lines of truth—love, and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other. It's a theme that goes early in the Scriptures throughout all the way to the end. Love and faithfulness, righteousness and peace. Early in this particular Psalm, Psalm 85, we have this running prayer of seeking restitution with God. Verses 4 to 7: “now restore us, O God of our salvation. Put aside your anger against us once more.”

So, I mean, they're starting from position where once they knew they had favour with God, somehow they fell out of favour with God. And now they're asking for that again. And different people have surmised when this Psalm might have been written, and I'll let you kind of work on

that yourself, but they have this prayer: “restore us again, O God of our Salvation, put aside your anger against us once more.”

Verse five, “will you be angry with us always? Will you prolong your wrath to all generations? Won't us again so your people can rejoice in you? Show us your unfailing Love, O Lord, and grant us your Salvation.”

So all of that is seeking peace with God Almighty expressing their personal desire for that relational peace between them and God. They want to get out from under what they sense a disfavor from God. And their hearts' cry is privileged relationship with God that they want. And then you come to verse 10: "love and faithfulness meet together righteousness and peace kiss each other.”

And then what follows is more of an emphasis along the truth side: verse 11 says, “Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness smiles down from heaven.”

And then there's, “yes, Lord, Yes, the Lord pours down his blessing. Our land will yield its bountiful harvests,” and they feel as though that's a state of where everything is good in the world. Justice is reigning, the right things have happened, and now there's prosperity in their lives. Too often we perhaps link those things together.

But it's interesting how the Psalmist here does that. So what they're seeking is this restored relationship with God, a sense of that Shalom to be back with them again, where they can have the sense that their future is bright and that they have God on their side. Love and faithfulness meet together righteousness and peace kiss each other. You have this sense that this is one of the great themes and scripture. Righteousness, the rightness of God, dealing with us in such a way as we have peace and where he can display his love to us. The law has to do with the righteousness and the rightness of God.

You have this in Genesis 18 verse 25 where Abraham is talking to God and says “will not the judge of all the earth do right?” And I hope you have that mindset that God is always just and he'll always do what's right and the God is always good in the way he manages things. So he took us as individuals who are separated from God and he made the ability for us to come back to God through Jesus Christ, of course. And shown his love and peace to us. Interesting how God works.

Interesting how God makes this one of the great themes where judgment can happen and peace can reign. Now are you a child of God that feels your status with God is on hold, that you're somehow on a “time out” as though things are not as they should be, not as they once were, not as they could be? Do you live with regrets that you cannot shake? I wanna say that there's peace available to you in coming to Jesus Christ. There's a sense of release that you can have. He offers forgiveness, and pardon and grace. Those are things God offers. Many of you who are listening to this today know that that's true and you know from the scriptures what it is to come to the cross and find Jesus and become a child of God and have that peace.

Scripture says he is our peace. Scripture says he fulfills the law. Jesus fulfilled the law. He did everything required to achieve righteousness, and he did so in human form on the earth, just as would have been expected of all of us if we wanted a perfect relationship with our God, well, he did it. Then he offers to us which is better than, in a sense, us needing to fulfill the requirements ourselves. Because Jesus was the son of God and he offers us the privilege of being adopted as sons. So we become not just people who did what was right, but we can become children of God. A favored relationship with God, not one that's just, “you better keep doing what's right,” but a

thing of “you’re my child. You’re someone who I love, I care for. I accept you, embrace you.” That’s the way our God is with us.

Thinking again of Jesus and his coming, in the Gospel of John 1:14 in the New Living Translation, it says, “so the word”—I believe, speaking of Jesus—“became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness,”—those themes are just again looked at from Psalm 85—“and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son.”

In the New International Version: “The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Again grace and truth. How do you show grace and be truthful at the same time? Scripture talks about speaking the truth in love and we try to do that quite often, perhaps, but it’s hard. How do we hold that exact balance?

And I want to say God did that and that’s emphasized in Psalm 85:10. Some of the other verses written in Psalms by the descendants of Korah are ones that are often favoured by many believers. Psalm 42, you have this wonderful phrase: “as the deer longs for the streams of water, so I long for you oh God, I thirst for God for the Living God.” Psalm 46 this: “God is our refuge and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble. So we will not fear when the earthquakes come, when the mountains crumble into the sea.” Psalm 46 is a great place to go in February or discouraged, but that was written by again the descendants of Korah. Those who perhaps lived under this sense of even bullying, perhaps because of their greater ancestor was, or who the greater ancestor was. They lived with that stigma in their heritage but they got beyond it somehow. And all of us probably have things where we’d like to just forget, wish others would forget, which there’s no history of certain things.

And in coming to Jesus, we have that: we have righteousness being upheld, and we have the possibility of potential just gaining that peace of the personal relationship with a loving God who loves us, cares for us, keeps us, will be on our side, not necessarily doing all the things that we want, but doing other things that are right for us. He is our peace. Interesting how much we want to be like a child restored in that relationship. Love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other.

In Psalm 46, also written by the descendants of Korah, there’s another phrase that perhaps you’re familiar with, which says “be still and know that I am God.” The verse before that talks about God, how he makes wars cease to the ends of the earth. He breaks the bow and shatters the spear, and he burns the shields with fire. Seems like there’s the threat of war or there is war. Or there has been war, and what you have here is sense of assurance that God overrules all of that. And no matter what happens, going forward, in the middle of that kind of tension, that’s where that phrase comes: “be still and know that I am God.” There’s that sense of his presence with us. If you want peace with God, you need his presence. I hope you will share that with one another if you know Jesus Christ, you know that peace. If you’re not sure if you do, I’d ask you to find someone that you know have some peace and come to them and find that for yourself. May God bless you today.

Third Sunday of Advent: Faye Reynolds on Psalm 126 for December 13, 2020

Greetings, my name is Faye Reynolds and I'm the Director of Ministries for the Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, and it is really a privilege this morning to be able to share with you in testimony what God has revealed to me as have studied our Scripture this morning of Psalm 126. It is my prayer that as you enter into the Psalm with me, God will also speak a word to you, whether it is through something I share, or maybe God will take you on a totally different path. And that's what makes Scripture so inspiring as His living word. And so let us pray this morning. Our Holy Father, living Word abiding Spirit. It is my prayer that through the time and space and technology you will speak and we will listen. As we together enter into your written word, Lord, inspire us to greater fulfill your will in each of our lives and in our corporate life together. In the name of our Lord Jesus, Amen.

I'd like to read for you our Psalm for this morning, 126: "When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, and our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

May the Lord bless the reading of His word this morning. If you are a church that follows the Lectionary readings, you'll be very familiar with this Psalm as it is used in the three year cycle as an Advent Psalm, a Lenten Psalm and preparation for Pentecost. So whether you are listening to this message on the joyful Sunday of Advent or another time of the year, it still has a message that we as a church must heed. The Psalm is called an Ascent Psalm, one of the 15 that are part of the Psalter, and some believe that it was sung by the priest, one for each step, 15 steps that led up to the temple.

And it is a joyful song. And I love to read it out loud, because it almost feels giddy with joy. It's like laughter is bubbling out of the pores of the psalmist as they recall the restoration that God has performed. One of the challenges in understanding the intent of this Psalm is whether it is celebrating a past event. Or it's a lament for a present difficulty. Or perhaps it's a prayerful hope for something in the future. And of course, in essence, it is all three at once. The first stanza reflects upon the past, perhaps remembering when God returned the exiles back to Jerusalem. And then the second stanza is sort of asking for a repeat performance. What God has done for them before. Will He do it again? And we don't know exactly what issue they're facing. Possibly a drought, but that doesn't matter so much for us this morning.

We need to reflect on what it means to us, and so I would ask you to complete this prayer: "Lord restore to me..." What would your prayer be right now? What would you love to see God do for your community, for your church, or for our country? "Lord restore to me, restore to us."

The second thing to reflect on this morning is what event in your past gives you hope for the future? Where have you experienced God's gracious hand upon your life? And out of the joy of that memory, you look forward knowing that God will do it again. Certainly in this season of the Coronavirus that has changed so many of our patterns of gathering, singing, celebrating, communing, it's very easy for us to enter into the lament of this song. Because something is not right. We feel off-kilter. We're off-balance in this present reality. This is a traumatic event in our lives. And though some are more deeply affected than others by it, it has directly affected the life of the church. And we are experiencing loss.

I have a Bible Study Group of primarily retired and senior women and we've been meeting for 15 years together, but right now we can't meet. Technology is not an option for us and to wear masks and sit 6 feet apart for those with hearing impairment is just not feasible. And so I miss

meeting them. And it is my prayer that Lord will restore to me the opportunity to gather once again with my sisters. And if you know me at all, you know that I love to sing and I love to lead in worship. Lord, restore to us the opportunity to sing our hearts out in praise for you!

Even before COVID, the Church has been in exile from its former place of society. Our voices have been marginalized. Our views and practices suspect. Lord, restore the Church as a witness to truth and righteousness. O Lord, restore our hearts of compassion to identify with others who are marginalized in society. May we joined them in their journey for justice.

In our North American or Western mindset, we view life very literally, as if the past is the past over and done. Today is today and we're always urged to live in the moment. But then we kind of consistently worry about the future. Now, I don't understand Eastern thinking. It's not my background, but I sense in God's realm that time is not this long line with the beginning and end. But maybe it's more like a light wave or a spiral, or maybe an image I can't imagine. What is time? And is the past really separate from today? Is my former self a child separate from who I am today?

Now, there are good things in our past that we love to bring forward and remember. We celebrate and cherish those times and that's the purpose of our photo albums. But there are also very hard times in our past and we would much rather forget them and move on: even deny they ever happened. This is true of trauma. Our minds want to forget. But our bodies never do. In truth, healing comes better with remembering and facing rather than forgetting.

My daughter, through her Masters of Neuroscience has been studying stress and what is called the "allostatic load." It is "the wear and tear on the body which accumulates as an individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress." Her particular study is generational stress. How those who lived through a highly traumatic experience, now it is affecting their offspring and the children of those offspring. There is great evidence of this chemical memory being passed on. It's like an elevated stress chemical that remains in the system.

It has huge implications for those who have experienced trauma and particularly our First Nations on the residential school system. I listened to a woman tell her story on CBC Radio. Her mother had been taken away from her family and placed in a residential school and thus she was raised in an environment that lacked motherly affection and love. As a result, she had little ability to love her children and specifically she lacked any capacity for empathy. And this has in turn highly impacted her children. But it's not only just those learned behaviors that we pass on to our children, but there's actually this deep residual body memory that's also passed on.

Well, my point to all this is that time is not linear and the past is not just the past. It continues to affect and shape us today and that's why it's important for us as Canadians to have an accurate memory of our collective past. And not just brush it off with, "I didn't have anything to do with that." Because their story is our story. Their hurt is our hurt. And perhaps in our weeping together in honest acknowledgment, new seeds of hope could possibly be sown.

On a more positive note, why do we celebrate birthdays? Because the past shapes our present today. I remember very clearly the joy of the birth of our children and seeing Stephen weep with tears. Those memories are seared into my mind and I can recall them at any time. I bring forth that past joy into the present as I celebrate my children. Their birth is not a past event, even though we celebrated on a specific date. And so too, we celebrate the coming of God in flesh to inhabit us in this earthly existence, we celebrate that through the season of Christmas. But the joy of Emmanuel, God with us is a constant celebration at daily joy of awe and wonder. We don't just confine it to the Christmas season. For God once again walks and talks with us in the garden.

God has restored us from exile out of Eden back into his loving presence. And thus we are in community and communion with the Trinity. Today and forever. “When God restores the fortune of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouths were filled with laughter and our tongues, with shouts of joy.” Those who dream: some say that refers to the prophets or the seers who dreamed of the day when the exile would come to an end, and God would do a new thing for Israel.

Are we those who can dream in the midst of exile, in the midst of a pandemic? In the midst of a terribly broken and messed up world? Can we dream of what God can do in us and through us to bring hope and healing? Are we dreaming now of the Church as an instrument of such healing? Because God has pitched his tent and dwelt among us here, and so in the midst of pandemic, do our mouths bubble with laughter, knowing that God will continue to do a good thing? Are we a people of such faith as this? That even those on the outside can say, “the Lord has done great things for them.” Oh God our Emmanuel, what will you need to do in us so that our neighbors might utter those same words: “the Lord has done great things for them.” Can we see your power in our midst? Can we feel your hand upon us? What I hear in this song is a resounding yes. Yes to the power and presence of God. It is full of uncompromised hope for those who dream.

The current situation is not the focus. But the past becomes the future joy. God is here. God is working. God is restoring. Do we believe that? I want to believe it. But the evidence is slim some days in my own life. And yet I do see it. I see it in our Iranian church in Vancouver that is baptizing hundreds every year into our faith. In many ways I am the outsider looking over and saying the Lord is doing great things for them. But then I remember the Lord is doing great things in us because they are part of our CBWC family and God is at work in them and this gives fuel to our dreams of what God will continue to do in us by the power of His Spirit. The greater question might be how might I need to get out of the way so that God can move? And it also begs the question, am I the dreamer? Or am I the naysayer? “It can't happen here. We're too stuck in our ways.”

This past September, my class of the Baptist Leadership Training School, BLTS, we held our 45th reunion by Zoom, and one of our classmates took the time to go through our yearbook and to take out what was written about us then, along with what's happening with us now. Quite a fun way to mold the past with the present. In that, one of our classmates tells her story of needing surgery in order to improve her ability to walk well. Prior to the first of her surgeries, the neurosurgeon asked what she would love to do that was currently impossible. She responded “It's a dream to go to New York and to be able to walk until I think my feet will fall off.” And then we were shown this photo of our friend taken in New York last spring with this gigantic smile on her face. Her mouth was truly filled with laughter and her tongue with shouts of joy.

What a fantastic image of this Psalm of one who could dream. We need to dream. But we are also required to do the gritty work of sowing with tears before the reaping of that harvest. Our classmate first had to have four surgeries. Sowing seed is an act of faith. Every time the farmer gets out in the field in the spring and puts that seed into the ground.

There is the dream of the bountiful harvest, without hope there would be no gathering. There would be no planting. And can you imagine planting in the midst of a drought and still dreaming of the crop? And yet, that is what has to be done if there's any hope of a harvest at all. For certainly there will be nothing to reap if nothing is sown.

So, what is God calling us to plant today? What are some of the seeds that we need to sow? Even if they bring tears and heartache for the moment. The Church is in a time of transition. This change has been forced upon us. What was your opening prayer this morning? “Lord restore to

me... restore to us..." Are we hoping for a return to the way things were, or are we dreaming of an even better future?

Are we going to be stuck into the lament of this Psalm? Are we able even now to sing for joy? The Lord has done great things for us. God will continue to do great things in us and through us. What are the seeds of hope for today that God is asking us by faith to sow? And I have one more thought for you to reflect upon. John 12:24 reads. "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Anyone who loves their life will lose it. While anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternity."

God planted a seed in Mary's womb to bring forth the person of Jesus to live among us, to walk, to teach, to show us the Kingdom. Jesus was the seed of the new Kingdom, but then that seed had to die. But it burst forth from the ground with new life. And the Kingdom is expanding exponentially by the power of his living Spirit and presence.

I want you to consider. Are you, am I, the seed that God wants to plant? And if so what needs to die in you. What needs to die in me so that new life can spring forth? For God's sake and for the sake of the church and for the sake of our world. Lord Jesus, am I a sower of dreams, or the seed that needs to die before you can have your way? This is our prayer: reveal to us, each of us, your will. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Larry Schram on Luke 1 for December 20, 2020.

Good morning, as we begin today, I'm going to invite you to bow with me as you're willing and able, and let's commit this time to the Lord. Gracious God and heavenly Father, Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Ever present healing, empowering, teaching, Holy Spirit, we pause before you again this day we give you thanks for your love and grace. We thank you that you are with us and for us. As we yield to you in the name of Jesus, we pray that as we open your word this day, that by the power of your Holy Spirit and by the power of your living word, that you will speak into our lives, Father.

We ask that you would open our eyes that we may see. Open our ears that we will hear and know. Open our minds that we will truly be transformed by your word. But most of all, Father, we pray that you'll open our hearts at that the level of soul. Your spirit and your living word will take root in our lives and encourage and direct and heal and lead. And may your Kingdom come, and your will be done in our lives this day. For we ask this all in Jesus' precious name, Amen.

In the world that I grew up in, whenever December rolled around, we would greet each other with "Merry Christmas." We knew what we meant by that greeting. We were wishing someone well, hoping that they would experience the best things of the Christmas season. Over the years and over the decades as our Canadian culture changed, that greeting change to "Happy Holidays." And again we know what is meant when we hear or use those words. We're saying, may you experience happiness and the best of this holiday season. I have no interest in engaging in the debate over why one greeting is superior to another, but I do have a prayerful desire that you would experience a certain type of Christmas this year. I desire that you would know that kind of Christmas that Mary knew and demonstrated so well when the Angel Gabriel told her what was about to happen. Why her world was about to experience an event that would change everything in her life. And we find ourselves in a very similar time.

Our world is also changing very rapidly. And I believe that Mary shows us a way to respond to this. So as you're willing and able, and if you have a favourite Bible translation, I encourage you to open it right now to Luke 1, beginning at verse 26. I'm going to read verses 26 to 38, which I believe will also appear in the video to follow along, and I'll be reading from the New International Version.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the Angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "greetings, you, who are highly favored. The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His Kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "the Holy Spirit will come on you. And the power of the Most High will over shadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who is said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

Thus far in the reading of God's Word. Now, if you are a student of the scriptures, then you know that there's a lot going on in these verses, and to fully unpack them would take thousands or even 10s of thousands of words. For instance, we could compare Gabriel's visits with both Zachariah and Mary. And note the similarities and differences. There are, after all, some incredible parallels to some of the Old Testament stories of other miraculous births, and the

insights will both deepen our appreciation of what was going on, as well as help us to understand the relationship between John and Jesus. Or, we could spend a lot of time talking about the virgin birth itself and the parallels to some of Paul's words in Philippians and Colossians. Doing so might help us to more fully grasp what J.I. Packer described as the greatest mystery in the Bible, the incarnation, which he described as an unfathomable mystery. Or we could spend a lot of time unpacking the names given to this baby to be born. We're told to call him Jesus. Son of the Most High and Son of God. And we need to take note of the fact that Luke is going to spend a lot of time in his gospel revealing how Jesus really fulfilled all of those titles and lived into and out of them. And finally, as good Baptists, we would have to spend some time making sure that we understand that the opening greeting that Gabriel used: "you who are highly favored" does not mean with Catholic theology claims it does. Mary was not sinless. And that was not why she was highly favored.

Doing this deep expository work with the passage would benefit many of us and both deepen and broaden our faith; however, it's my belief that the greatest single gift of this passage for our faith is found in Mary herself. Mary was troubled. And afraid because she knew that angels like Gabriel don't show up to simply say "Shalom" and then disappear. When an angel like this appears, everything changes forever. In other words, Mary found herself in a place that's very similar to the one that we find ourselves in today.

Our world is forever and rapidly changing these days, and Mary's response to her forever and rapidly changing world within the center stage in this story points us to how we can respond as well. So how did Mary respond? First of all, let's take note that she was afraid as verses 29 to 30 make abundantly clear. Second of all, let's take note that she asked questions, good questions, as verse 34 makes very plain. And finally, Mary yielded to her Lord, as verse 38 so succinctly frames it. I really can't emphasize enough that this is how Mary responded, because it is counter to the often-expressed triumphalism of many Christians these days. Many social media posts on both Facebook and Instagram emphasize how true followers of Jesus are never afraid and never ask questions, but simply live in triumphal victory all the time. I wonder, as I read some of these posts in social media, what Bible they're referring to and what Christian history they're drawing from?

When I read the Scriptures and church history, I see many people just like Mary: troubled, afraid, and questioning what's going on and wondering how it can be the way it is. I hope that that sounds and feels familiar to you. Because if it does, then I want you to know you're in good company. I'm there with you. I am also troubled and afraid by some of the cataclysmic changes that are taking place in our world right now. I have a lot of questions about what's going on and I believe that a lot of you are probably with me as well. If that's your story, please hear me. It's OK to be afraid. It's OK to be troubled. It's OK to ask questions about what's going on. As long as it doesn't paralyze you. Mary shows us the way forward when she said despite her fears and questions, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

How did Mary get there? The struggle for many of us is we wonder if Mary is really like us enough that we can learn from her and respond like she did. After all, the angel said that she was highly favored. That the Lord was with her, and that the Holy Spirit was going to fill her overwhelmingly. Doesn't that mean that Mary was in fact some kind of superhero of the faith? Wasn't she really in a class all of her own, like some people from Catholic and Anglican background believe? And we simply can't relate to people who are that superior to us in the faith.

My short answer to that is no. It's my belief that Mary was just like us in every way that really counts. When Luke wrote the phrase that Mary was highly favored, he did not mean that she was somehow unique, a superhero of the faith and therefore worthy of God's favor. He meant that she had received God's favor. In other words, Mary received God's grace for her unique role

as the mother of God's Son. That's what it means to know and be a recipient of God's love and grace, by the way.

That he is with us like he was with Mary, in that we have received the same Holy Spirit that Mary received. All of it was God's grace lovingly given to those who need it. Mary was not, contrary to some theological presuppositions, so unique that we can't relate to her. Mary was in fact just like us. Troubled, afraid, questioning. Needing and receiving the loving grace of God. It is my belief that Mary experienced that and knew that full well. I need to be honest and tell you that I don't know how she knew it. And I can't prove this beyond all question for the skeptics and cynics of our world. I simply look at her response to all of this: I am the Lord's servant. May it be with me, as you have indicated, or as you have said. And I believe that it was God's loving grace that brought her to that place. That is, after all, what God's grace always does.

Biblically, it is God's grace from beginning to end that brings us to the place of believing. And receiving and trusting. And that is exactly where Mary found herself and what motivated her to do what she did. And that's why I pray that you will truly have a Mary Christmas this year. Not an M-E-R-R-Y Christmas, but a M-A-R-Y Christmas. I pray that you would know God's loving grace just like Mary did in that His grace will bring you through whatever is to come, just like he did for Mary. It doesn't matter if you are afraid and questioning. It doesn't matter if you're bewildered and feeling overwhelmed. God's loving grace can meet you like he met Mary, enable you to say "I am the Lord's servant. May his word and grace to me be fulfilled." May you truly have a Mary Christmas this year, one filled to overflowing with God's grace and love. Amen.

Christmas Sunday: Shannon Youell on Isaiah 61:10-62:3 for December 27, 2020

I wonder how many of us here today are sighing with relief. It's over. The excess of our celebrations is packed away or in the process of being so. The leftovers are being slowly whittled down and eating a carrot stick is a refreshing change of pace.

Most of us love celebrations. Births, Weddings, Anniversaries, Birthdays, Christmas, Easter. So we know the feeling of jubilation once they are under way, thrilled that that which we were waiting for, that which we hoped for is now happening.

Last summer our daughter married and we hosted 90 people in our yard. As the day approached the anticipation increased until on that day, we gathered on a beach to witness the bride and groom enter into a covenant of promises to keep to one another, of living a life of love and caring for one another and any others that come into their lives, in all the ordinary days ahead of them.

Hope and joy were palpable in the air.

And in the days after, as we removed twinkle lights from the trees, returned all we had borrowed and rented, packed it all away, for many of us that celebration was done and behind us. Our days returned to their normal ordinariness.

But for the couple, now entering into what this covenant lived out actually requires of them, they have to continually be reminded of those promises, even and especially, when life is disrupted by the things that disrupt human life. There is no resting on the celebration without fulfilling of the covenant, of what they've been called to and committed to as they walk out their new life together.

This season we've just been celebrating is like that. It's easy for us, once it's all packed away and behind us to just rest in our ordinary lives, often sighing with relief.

Yet the very celebration itself reminds us not only of the hope of what is to come but also of the hope that has come, the hope that disrupting our everyday lives by calling us back to the joy of being co-labourers with God in his redeeming, reconciling, restoration work of "bringing all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Ephesians 1:10).

Today, in our passage from the prophet Isaiah, that exuberance and joy of hope in the air drips off the page.

We're going to pick up at Isaiah 61:10 and go through to 62:3:
I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in robes of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

*For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow,
So the sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.*

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
Till her righteousness shines out like the dawn, her salvation like a blazing torch.
The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory;
You will be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will bestow.*

You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

It's no wonder Isaiah is celebrating! Look at what has occurred prior to his great praise and delight:

- Heavenly promises have come to earth
- Prophecies of old and long-yearned for are being unfolded
- Hope is heavy in the air

Verse 10 gives us the imagery of exactly what occurs at a wedding: The bride is dressed and presented to the groom. A covenant is enacted and then it's time to party! Hope is heavy in the air!

So heavy, so tangible, that Isaiah says he can't keep silent for the sake of Zion, for the sake of the people! He can't stay quiet because this message because this Message of the One who will come like a blazing torch amongst them is now revealed. In the same way, we shouldn't keep silent for the sake of the world that God so loves and to whom he commands us to love as he loves.

God-With-Us has put on flesh, incarnated himself, and salvation has come like that blazing torch with righteousness and justice shining out like the dawn! And for this, we cannot keep quiet. Or can we?

After we've sang the familiar and favourite songs, retold the wondrous stories, cleaned up the party messes and packed it all away for another year, do we also somehow inadvertently pack away—or put on the back burner—the full message of the Good News, the Gospel that is now here on earth as it is in heaven and which Isaiah expresses in this prophecy leading to his great delight and joy.

As we look at this passage, it is clear that celebration is in order. But what is it that is being celebrated? Birth of the Messiah isn't mentioned here at all, although for the Messiah to exist a birth certainly occurred. Rather the passage tells us that what is being celebrated so extravagantly is the clothing of the people, by God, "with garments of salvation and being arrayed in robes of righteousness."

That the people are now called "oaks of righteousness for the display of God's splendor," that as we wear these clothes displaying the character of God, we will shine out like the dawn, like blazing torches; and that enacting and enlivening God's gracious righteousness and justice brings Him splendor, right into the crown in his hand.

Some 700 years later, when Jesus begins his active ministry on earth, he refers to this prophecy in Luke 4. This is no passing reference, but rather the foundation of what God, incarnated, is ushering into the human reality: salvation is good news to the poor, the disenfranchised, the brokenhearted, the captives, prisoners of darkness: this good news of bringing his justice that delivers people out of shame and rejection and back into the community of humans to God and humans to one another. The Good News of God establishing his kingdom as the rule and reign of earth *and* heaven.

The Good News of redeeming humans back into his shalom—rising humans out of the ashes and crowning them as his image bearers to shine like the dawn among all the peoples with the righteousness and justice; of God's desire that all his creation to be reconciled and restored to him and to community relationships again. Of restoring that which has been distorted by humanity's desire to be gods of their own selves and lives. Of being "crowns of splendor in the hand of the Lord" and "oaks of righteousness...for the display of God's splendor."

This is the Good News of being invited to participate with God in rebuilding and restoring the places long devastated, where hope has been disrupted by the cruelty, oppression, pain and death and of humans living life as our own gods.

This and so much more is what Isaiah's words are delighting in and celebrating. It is clear that God's salvation action is for the peace and justice in our neighbourhoods, cities and the world: shalom—complete wholeness, healing and restoring of all things, both now and into our forever.

And as his people, set free from sin and fear of death that incites “every man for himself” mentality, as God's people wear those clothes of salvation and righteousness and justice, we display God's splendor.

But what does that mean? What is God's splendor? What is his splendor but his character? His splendor is for the display of his character through this salvation that has entered in human history. Jesus, in John 17, talking to his Father, says he has brought God glory on earth by completing the work he gave him to do. And then says “and now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” And then, even further, “I have given them (us, all believers) the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one.”

What is this glory? *Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible* notes that in the New Testament, just as in the Old, glory refers to salvation now “revealed in the Messiah's work of deliverance.” Thus John presents Jesus as the revelation of God's glory – his works as the signs of that same glory. Participation in the glory of the resurrected Christ (the work) is a participation in the glory of God. Believers are the image and glory of God, giving glory by leading lives worthy of the gospel, through obedience, purity, good deeds and willingness to suffer for Christ.

We see this also in the Psalms so many times – “God's glory rests in his mighty works manifested in creation” itself the Psalmist writes. At the announcement of Jesus' birth the angels declare: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all people on whom his favor rest.”

When we go back to, what is God's splendor? Not only here in our Isaiah passage, but in many other references, we remember that God's splendor is the display of his character through salvation that has entered human history. These words “splendor” and “glory” are often interchangeably as they are communicating a very similar aspect of God and God's relationship with humans.

God's splendor, his glory, is displayed through his image bearers as we enact and enliven his salvation of righteousness and justice in the true Hebrew understanding of justice *tsedaqah*: that kind of justice that delivers from slavery and oppression and restores community relationships. And then that righteousness (*misphat*) is displayed when we are deliverers of justice that restores community relationships including our relationships with God.

No wonder Isaiah is delighting greatly in the Lord, rejoicing. God is adorning, he's clothing us with clothes of righteousness and justice that bring shalom to the world, and as we image bearers of God shine in the world, and as we do we become crowns of splendor in God's hand. We have displayed God's character just as Jesus, in John 17, rejoices in and exactly as Isaiah foretold in the beginning of this chapter 61 prophecy; and of which Jesus announced his intentions at the outset of his ministry in Luke 4.

It is not necessarily our ritual acts of worship that bring God glory, yet part of giving God glory comes from our honor of him, but it's also our obedience and allegiance to display God's salvation plan of redemption, reconciliation and restoration to all those to whom God has been inaccessible and to whom the world has neglected, repressed, oppressed and trampled upon.

How, then can we keep silent? How then can we pack up our celebratory decorations and simply go back into the regular days of ordinary living? God, through Christ and his work has co-opted

us to join his great Good News of his Kingdom here on earth working towards his understanding of righteousness and justice: Isaiah eloquently pours it out for us:

- To binds up the brokenhearted
- Proclaiming freedom to whatever holds people captive
- Releasing humans from prisons of their own devices and the devices of others
- To comfort all who mourn and grieve
- To pour upon our heads gladness instead of ashes
- Clothing us with the liberty from these things so we rise up from what Isaiah tells us God calls us in chapter 1:30 (oaks with fading leaves) to what Isaiah now says in 61:3 to being oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for his splendor.

Tim Keller has written "The Gospel...is not just about individual happiness and fulfillment. It is not just a wonderful plan for 'my life' but a wonderful plan for the world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew everything. Gospel-centered churches do not only urge individuals to be converted, but also to seek peace and justice in our cities and in our world."

God calls us to reorient our lives around mercy and justice, around being healers of the world. Jesus describes his followers as the 'light of the world' and that our participating in acts of righteousness that delivers the kind of justice that restores, reveals our God who loves the world, so much so he sent Jesus to usher in God's kingdom where peace and justice, and healing and completeness prevail: shalom.

Rather than packing everything away at the end of the celebration, this is the time to intentionally pursue God with all our hearts, minds souls, and strength so that we are clothed in his righteous acts of delivering the kind of justice that restores those community relationships; advocating justice for all peoples in all ways; in loving neighbours as we desire to love ourselves and to be loved. As we enact (wear our clothes) of his mighty love, compassion, mercy, justice and grace, we shine – not from our own light but the light of the world and we display God's splendor where ever we live, work play and pray. This is what brings God glory.