

“The Ruined Cities” / Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 / 14 December 2014

“They shall build up the ancient ruins.” Oh, that's nice. I think I know what we're talking about what here—the Parthenon, the Acropolis, stuff like that? “They shall raise up the former devastations.” Well, yeah, could be some place like Machu Picchu? “They shall repair the ruined cities.” Ancient Babylon, or even modern day Fallujah, right? “They shall repair the devastations of many generations.” What kind of a prophecy is this in the book of Third Isaiah? Does the prophet have any idea how complicated this building project is going to get? And what about Port-au-Prince, where legions of people are still living in tents, four years after the earthquake? And what about the labyrinthine miles of corrugated metal slums that encircle every major city south of the Rio Grande? Are those slated for reconstruction? I tell you, I don't even know what to do with this promise of Isaiah. I almost don't want to touch it, but I can't preach the New Testament reading because, well, I preached about John the Baptist last Sunday.

This is lovely poetry here about rebuilding the ancient ruins, and I want so badly to believe it, don't you? But it's just such a big job—rebuilding the derelict cities of humankind—and one that hardly seems worth undertaking. Will the task include the Allegheny West neighborhood of North Philadelphia? Because I'm not sure that people will want to live someplace where they can't even have a small yard and a garage. They've been trying to rebuild Braddock for about ten years now, and despite a lot of progress, the houses just keep disappearing, replaced by urban prairie. What does this promise mean? I'd like to believe it, but I don't suspect they'll be rolling Ford Fairlanes off the assembly lines in Detroit again. Rebuilding is tough work, maybe even harder than building something new in the first place. We have three and a half million homeless people in our country today—that's equal to one quarter of the population of this state. (Some studies claim that one in four homeless people went to war for this nation.) We have three and a half million homeless people, but one of the great ironies of modern history is that we also have eighteen and a half million vacant homes. That would be five houses per homeless person! Houses sit empty, falling into ruin, waiting to be filled. Down in Clairton, you can walk through the business district and see in the shop windows where merchandise still sits on the shelves of forsaken storefronts, yellowed and outdated. In one of them, you can see daylight through the ceiling. It's as if the shopkeepers just went fishing one day, thirty years ago, and never came back. The roofs slowly collapse. “They shall rebuild the ancient ruins,” the Prophet Isaiah claims, “For I the Lord love justice.” It's a hard claim to accept. Resurrection is one thing; resurrection means the reclamation of a human life, and we all know that such a thing is worth reclaiming. But this massive rebuilding project seems to me to have dubious merit. Some things just need to be allowed to pass.

I have a hobby of sifting through the wreckage of ruined places, as many of you know. If I'd done a little better in Hebrew class, I might have considered a career in archeology. It all started many years ago, in college, when a friend pressured me to start dating a girl that I didn't really want to date. She was nice enough I don't mean to put her down. But this was in the early nineties, and she wore nothing but black, with dyed black hair and wicked-looking makeup. She was still riding the tail end of the New Wave, but I had already moved on to a new identity as a literary snob who drank French-press coffee and wore leather elbow patches...and the less said about that, the better. But on the Saturday morning before our double date, another friend showed up at my door and said, “Dude, wanna go to New Mexico?” I did...but mostly I just wanted to get out of that evening's date. Within half an hour, we were speeding west down Interstate 40, bound for New Mexico. For \$15, we spent that night in the famous Blue Swallow Motel in Tucumcari. And out there in the wastelands of eastern New Mexico, we came across whole villages left derelict when the interstate replaced old US Route 66. In some places, houses stood intact with furniture still in all the rooms and mail in the old desk drawers, old toys, the clothing of a bygone age. I was fascinated by it all, piecing together little bits of evidence about the long-ago occupants of these old towns: people just as real as you and me who lived their lives, feared their fears, loved their loves, cried their tears, then up and left. Well, I was hooked. I've

been an “urban archeologist” ever since that morning twenty-three years ago. The same friend and I are always planning our next trip out to New Mexico, except that it's harder to get away these days, and a whole lot further. Those old towns are fun to visit, but they wouldn't be worth rebuilding. People left because they ran out of water. People left because there was nothing to do. People left because no one had any roots there, no history, no allegiance to the place. And that's the key issue: You and I abandon things, and places, and even other people because we lack commitment. The villages of eastern New Mexico will never be rebuilt, Isaiah notwithstanding, because nobody is really from there, and no one ever really loved them. All the people who tried to settle there came from someplace else. They took their chances on the High Plains, but it was never really home, and when the place proved inhospitable they drifted along to other places. As an aside: Just before we set off on our road trip, I'd left a note on the door of the girl I was supposed to be going out with. The note said, “Sorry, I'm going to New Mexico.” In response, she wrote an angry poem and taped it to my door. The poem was a bitter attack on all men, entitled “New Mexico.”

Well, it's already the Third Sunday of Advent, and the theme for today is joy. Joy and ruination! No, I do not believe that all the waste places of our world will be restored. It's just not a worthwhile project. But Isaiah is speaking in metaphors here. You and I have ruined places in our lives. The derelict cities are you and me. Rebuilding is hard work, and in most places in this world it's not worth undertaking. It's far easier to pull down all that's old and simply start over. And yet, the God of Israel, whose Spirit whispers through this ancient text, is above all a Keeper of covenant. God enters into a binding agreement with God's people to find them when they're lost; pursue them when they stray; restore them when they're broken. Rebuilding is harder than throwing out the old and simply starting over. But covenant is God's nature. As broken as we become, as desolate and burned out as life sometimes makes us, it is not in God's nature to walk away and build something better in another place. The tough task of rebuilding the same old lives in the same old places, this is God's way. Shouldn't it be our way, too?

Once again, we've got the nameless writer of Third Isaiah comforting the exiles who've finally made their way out of captivity and home across the deserts to Israel, only to discover that the place they'd been dreaming of for all these years, their distant home, was an utter shambles. The cities lay in ruins. There's nothing left of the sacred Jerusalem temple, which doesn't speak well of the God whose home they always thought it was. Wild animals were living in their burned out houses. All that they had owned was destroyed or stolen. The fields were overgrown by generations of scrub. Home just wasn't “home,” as we discussed a few weeks ago. And whenever you find yourself in a place where home no longer feels like home, where all that you'd been hoping for turns out to disappoint you, and all the places where you ought to belong feel alien, then the question inevitably arises: Am I right about anything? What about this weakling God who doesn't even protect the holy place, God's own dwelling? Is God with me—and does it even matter? If I'm loved and as special as a snowflake, if there is some benevolent power out there in the universe who can be known and experienced, if there is a God, then how is it that I'm forsaken?

Oh, I know it's Advent, a season of merrymaking and Christmas parties, but I think we can relate, can't we? Things I thought to be permanent were not. My childhood God didn't deliver, at least not in the way I'd hoped. Things that I've loved have been claimed by the wind, or by time, or by simple forgetfulness and neglect. Yes, exile we know. Disappointing homecomings we know. Even the collapse of our old and cherished faith, many of us know that! Ah, but DO you know the painful, joyful secret of resurrection? There's always a cross between here and there. Don't you know the age-old truth of resurrection, that a healed heart is never quite the same as a heart that never got broken in the first place? (Maybe you know that. I think you do.) A restored heart is not the same as one that never got damaged. It's stronger. More loving, wiser, and calmer, more generous, for it has known deprivation, more capable of gratitude, for it has known hardship. The broken and rebuilt heart is more capable of joy—real joy—because all abiding joy is born of suffering, at least for us poor grownups.

Can you even imagine a world where joy is born of anything less than sacrifice, commitment, persistence, downright pain? All the greatest joys in your life are things that have cost you, and cost you plenty. All your most solid relationships have entailed their share of suffering and conflict. Perhaps that explains God's obstinate commitment to the same old broken people. Perhaps we couldn't really be God's joy and delight if we'd never cost God anything, if we'd never broken God's heart. Just keep rebuilding them! "Build up the ancient ruins. Repair the devastations." That's the way of our covenant God. Shouldn't it be our way, too?

One danger of rebuilding what's broken—as opposed to starting fresh—is that it can cause us to try to live life in reverse, and that's never good. A Sunday school teacher was telling the story of Lot's wife, how she looked back over her shoulder at her beloved old home as it burned, and she turned into a pillar of salt. One child said knowingly, "Yeah, that happens. My mom looked back while she was driving and turned into a telephone pole." Yes, trying to move forward while looking backward is a sure recipe for disaster. Oh, we've all tried it. In fact, whenever anything goes wrong in life, when a loved one dies, when we make an unwanted transition, when illness strikes, or sadness, or just plain boredom, our tendency is always to look around behind us and discover what we're missing. What did we have before that now we lack? If only we could get back to the way things were...in our health, in our marriages, in our relationships, in our golf game! In the church, if only we could get back to the days when we had to have three services to accommodate all the many souls who wanted to bring their journeys of faith within the precincts of this small room! You can't blame the writer of this portion of Isaiah if he or she longs for the rebuilding of the ancient ruins of Jerusalem, but you can certainly hope that the finished product won't look exactly like the one that got destroyed so long ago. For one thing, it might make sense to build higher walls around the city this time, so foreigners can no longer come and loot the place.

But this is the classic conundrum of rebuilding; if we're not careful, we end up trying to recreate something that is forever gone or perhaps never truly was. Aren't terrorists just trying to journey back in time to some supposedly bright day when there was no Western influence in their nations, when times were simpler for them, and they felt a greater sense of power and autonomy at home. It's questionable whether there ever was such an era, but like the kid in the joke said, when you're looking backward while driving forward, you just might turn into something. Many groups in our world today are trying to escape back into some bygone era that's really less historical fact than the sentimental yearnings of the modern imagination. No, the healed heart is never quite the same as the heart that never got broken. You can never quite get back to the pre-broken state, and in some ways that's bad...but in other ways it's good. All growth and healing occurs as we journey through the present and into the future; it's forward looking. The covenant God rebuilds the same old lives in the same old places with the same old materials, and somehow manages always to declare, "Behold, I make all things new." We can't go back. We mustn't go back. The call is always into God's future.

It's especially hard when your faith starts to change—as was happening for the people of Israel who survived the exile then came home to a place they didn't know. It's just so hard when your understanding of God is called forward to a new place, because changing faith can feel like disappearing faith. It's not. The call is always forward.

"Build up the ancient ruins, raise up the former devastations; repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice." Yes, rebuild them, the devastations of the heart, the devastations of the home, devastated relationships, devastations that got passed down from one generation to the next. God's way is to just keep working with the same old broken down people. Well, what are the broken places in your life? Oh, those ruined places of the soul; if you don't rebuild them, they just sit there getting uglier and uglier, a mute testimony to failure and loss. Who are the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners crying out from the margins of your life. And how are you going to be good news to them? How will you rebuild? Rebuilding happens slowly, one brick at a time. Rebuilding happens when you've got a forward-looking plan. Rebuilding happens

when you've got more than just your own two hands to work with. It's best done in community, like an Amish barn-raising. "Build up the ancient ruins. Repair the devastations." A joyful persistence, or "faithfulness": that's the way of the One we call God. Shouldn't it be our way, too? Amen.