

Isaiah 61

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame was double, and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs.

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Luke 5:36-39

He also told them a parable: 'No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, "The old is good." '

**“After the Disaster”
Rev. Charles Schuster
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It makes you think deeper thoughts when you see the fire trucks with the lights flashing and the police directing traffic and you see flames coming up out of the roof. It gives you pause to ponder what it must be to live in a place like that, where there's nothing much left, and you pick up the broken pieces of your life. It makes you wonder, when you drive through the city where there's been a tornado, and you see houses blown down and trees

splintered like toothpicks and cars picked up from where they were and carried yards, and you see streets where they used to be, but there's nothing like it was, and the devastation is beyond what you ever thought could happen. When clouds build into a burst of force in the valley, water comes through in a wall of water and it's like some kind of insidious hand that scours and scrapes the earth like a giant dozer on the loose with no inhibitions or boundaries and with no direction except its own perverse will, to do what it wants, and in the wake of all the mud and debris, and the broken, fallen structures loaded onto trucks and hauled to the dump, and to know it isn't just property, it's also loss of life. When the fire falls from the sky with a bolt of light and heat and there's a spark that becomes a smoldering ember, and it becomes a flame, and then a raging inferno that licks at the land like a dragon with a forked tongue, and everything in its path either melts or vaporizes, and there's nothing much to do after it's over but to sift through the ash like an archaeologist on a dig. Images imprinted on our minds of those planes flying low into buildings turning downtown into wreckage. What once was office becomes rubble, and there remain more questions than answers, more fear than faith, more chaos than calm. A crisis comes and some of us have known it. A fire in the house, a crash on the road, a tornado in the town, a bomb in a building, a diagnosis in a doctor's office, a divorce decree when we thought everything was fine, a pink slip telling you your services are no longer needed and we thought they were, a cough that becomes chronic, a child with a problem that becomes medical or psychiatric. It happens, a disaster.

It happens. It's already happened to some of us. It will happen to all of us some time, I think, and today we think about after the disaster. What do we do? What do we do? We talk, that's what we do. After the disaster, we talk. We will need a pastor. I don't mean a preacher. Preachers write out scripts and speak them while we sit and listen, like I'm doing. We don't need a prophet. Prophets are focused on the big picture, and they won't hear our small concerns. But a pastor. Not ordained, not frocked, not official. A pastor. Someone who has passion for compassion, an attitude to listen. A pastor. A listener. Like Isaiah, 3rd Isaiah, somebody who wrote with the name of Isaiah, after the exile. Not Isaiah, but someone who wrote in the spirit of Isaiah, after the exile, in the return of the exiles, after the disaster. God told him to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to open the door of the prisons, for this is the year of God's favor.

The pastor listens in a crisis, find someone who listens, because you'll need them. Larry Henshaw tells a story of when his town was hit by an earthquake and his daughters, Debbie and Carol, little girls, locked in their room, in their bedroom because the earthquake caused their beds to shift and to move in front of the door and he couldn't get it open, and they couldn't get out, and they panicked and they screamed, and Larry the father spoke calmly. "Don't worry, don't you know you're Henshaws, and Henshaws know how to keep cool in a crisis?" In a short time, as Larry was doing everything he could to get the door open, because he was fearful that the whole house would collapse, Carol, the little girl's five-year-old loud voice from the other side of the door, she said, "Daddy, Daddy, I think we come from Mommy's side of the family."

Wayne Brower, who told that story, adds, "Remember Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who said, 'The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,' even if we know that, we don't stop being afraid. There are people who will listen. In a crisis, we find them. We have members of our church who have gone into disaster situations, hurricanes and so on, and they learned to listen. One of them said, "You know what you find, right after a disaster? You find people usually very heroic right at first. You ask them how they're doing, how it's going to be. They'll be fine. They'll be okay, and they'll say things like, "We've got our lives. Material things are gone, but they're not that important, when you think about it." Then after they see the damage, the scene, they get sometimes they become angry and depressed, and sometimes it's hard for the workers who go in, because they take their anger out on them. But the anger stimulates them to dig in, and the anger stimulates them to help them deal with a difficult situation, to dig in and it helps them get through it. She went on to say, the first holiday is tough, when you're going to get the ornaments out, and you realize they're not there. And all those keepsakes, they're gone.

Another member of our church talks about Ground Zero, sixteen days after 9/11 she was there. Blank stares. People are in shock. They really haven't had time to process the extent of their loss. I saw fear and hurt and anger. I saw robots doing their daily tasks. I heard them want to share what they had been through, and what they were feeling, and their questioning. When they were ready to tell you, you had to stop what you were doing and listen, because one of the most important lessons I learned was to be a good listener, and to keep my mind focused on what they were saying to me."

Find someone who will listen. How important that is. Really, it's not what we say in times like that to someone that helps, so much. It's not what we know. It's not even our faith conviction, thought that's important, it's not the most important thing. It's our presence. Nothing big. Something small that is bigger than we know. Like our Stephen ministers here. Or this Love in Action program that we're getting started. Both of these programs give us a chance to be a pastor, after a disaster. To listen to someone who needs to talk. To help someone out who needs a little help. To do some good because it's right. And to be with someone because it's time. Love in action, pastors of the people, to the people, all of us together. If we have a need, we'll find some way to help. We're not alone. We're all in this together. We may be only one person in the world, but we may be the whole world to one person. After the disaster, we find a pastor who will listen.

The second thing - because that's not enough - after the disaster we move forward. We find a way to move forward. After the disaster we move forward faster. A bright yellow highway department truck crept along a quiet city street, Remington, I think. A worker slowly climbed out of the truck and dug a large hole between the sidewalk and the street. A few minutes later, a second worker got out and filled that hole with dirt and tamped down the dirt. Every few yards along that street, they repeated the same procedure, again and again. One dug the hole, the other filled it in. Someone who was watching this asked what they were doing, and the supervisor explained, "Look, we're part of the Urban Beautification Project." "Well, what does digging a hole and filling it in, how's that beautiful?" And the supervisor explained, "You see, the guy who plants the trees is sick today." That's not moving forward. That's just digging holes.

Isaiah told the people, after the Exile, their descendants would be known in every nation, and it would be like flowers blooming in a garden. Moving forward. After the crucifixion, you see the disciples. They had given so much, and so much was lost when Jesus was arrested, when he was put on trial, when he was taken to carry his cross, and when he was put to death, and then the risen Christ appears and the message of Easter comes, which is what forms us. He appears, we are told, in many different forms. A stranger on the road to Emmaus. A gardener at the tomb, dressed in white. An apparition like a ghost at the Upper Room. All these different appearances, but each time the words exchanged say essentially the same thing. "If you love me, feed my sheep. If you love me, then do what I did. If you love me, move forward faster. Don't put your hand to the plow and look back. Let the dead bury the dead. Get it moving, keep it going." That's why we have this Love in Action program.

Who hasn't been hurt by life, by the events in life? Pat certainly had. He grew up in Texas, where the men were men and the women were too. He love to dance. His mother taught dance. He was a mama's boy. His dad was an engineer. Kids picked on them because he loved to dance. Five of them beat him up one day. His dad told him he was going to have to stand up for himself, and taught him how to defend himself, and the next day he was determined to go back and find them, but he was afraid. He was not afraid of the five, he was afraid of letting his father down. But he found them, took on all of them one by one, all five of them. That's when he learned to move forward. That's when he learned that life is not something to be afraid of. Pat will be remembered as a dancer. He will be remembered for his courage. Just ask anyone who knew him, like his wife Lisa, or the people he worked with on his TV show. Pat died this week, Patrick Swayze, *Dirty Dancing, Ghost...* Patrick Swayze who battled pancreatic cancer to the very end. He called it the Beast, and you could say the Beast won, because he died, but that's not exactly true. He died with more to do in his life than he had time to do it. He died having fulfilled his obligations, but looking for more. Patrick Swayze was tougher than those five boys. He was tougher than Texas. He was tougher than cancer, and he died knowing he was an inspiration to others.

I think that's the only way to live, to spend your days and not waste them. To know your life matters to others, and there's momentum that carries forward. Never stop. Never give up, after the disaster. Move forward, advance, and if death comes, they will remember. Up until the time you died, you still were moving forward. We're all in this together. What makes us want to help each other? What makes us volunteer for all the programs we have here in the church? What makes us put our love into action? We know what it is to hurt, and we know how it feels to have someone care. We know what it is to wish for someone to help us, and we want to be a help to someone who needs us. Nothing big. Just to be there. We may be only one person in the world, but we have a chance to be the whole world to one person. After the disaster we move forward faster, with a little help from a friend who will listen.

Finally, after the disaster, one final point, so important to never forget. Never forget laughter. Let life be lighter, especially when things get heavy. Weddings can be disasters.

Sometimes, preachers forget whose wedding it is. Sometimes preachers will sit down the wedding party before the rehearsal, and they will tell the wedding party that they noticed that the people who are in the wedding are much too light-hearted, they're having way too much fun, and this is a serious and somber occasion, and they need to act like that, because after all, they're in a church. Not here. Not our preachers. We tell the bride and groom, and all their people, "Lighten up." We tell them at the rehearsal, whatever happens at the wedding the next day is exactly what we planned, and if the bride trips coming down the aisle, then all the bridesmaids are supposed to trip going back up the aisle. William Ward said, "To make a mistake is human, to stumble is commonplace, to be able to laugh at yourself is maturity." And Martha Bolton said, "Embarrassing moments shouldn't be eternal. They are not the end of the world, nor your reputation. Start living them down, by laughing it up."

A disaster will have its way with us, unless we can find a way to laugh. Sometimes it's the only thing left to do. Sometimes, it's the only way out. That's why the thing that's most remembered about Jesus was how much fun he was to be around. There were people who were critical of him. If you read the text prior to what Joel read this morning, you would see it. But you know it. People critical of Jesus - "Your disciples never fast. John's disciples fasted, you know. Your disciples, they picked grain from the field on the Sabbath. That's work. On the Sabbath, that's wrong. Your disciples were always laughing and they were out of control. You need to get them into control, don't you see?" And he said to them, "Tell you what. You put new wine into old wineskins, and you see what happens." And then he said, "Did you hear the one about the farmer who went up to plant some seed, and there was a hole in his bag? And the seed fell out? Did you hear that one? Did I tell you about the man who had two sons and one of them took his inheritance and spent it all and then came back and said, "Hi, Dad." "Did you know it's easier to get a camel through the eye of a needle than it is for some of you people to get it?"

Jesus, when pressed to the point of frustration, told a story. When things got serious, he found some fun. He knew he would die. What's he do? He throws a party. People always need laughter, especially now. South Carolina congressman shouting at the President "You lie." He learned it. Tennis star who questioned where the tennis ball hit, walks up to the line judge and says, "I'm going to kill you." She should get the message, bet she will. Norman Cousins understood it. He said, "It has always seemed to me that laughter is the human mind's way of dealing with what is incongruous, what doesn't add up. Harry Truman's father John was a road overseer, responsible for maintaining the roads in that part of Missouri, where they lived. While attempting to move a large boulder from the road one day, John suffered a hernia and ultimately that ended his life. Harry Truman, president of the United States, but before that he was a county judge, and in memory of his father, he took on the cause, as a person in that position could, in that capacity of improving the roads in the county, and he personally inspected roads and bridges and studied building techniques, and became a member of the American Road Builders association. Harry Truman, President, achieved much in his life because of the way his father died and because of his sense of humor that he always had, felt that the greatest honor bestowed upon him by a man who was in charge of road construction, Tom Beech, who called Harry Truman a "roads scholar."

Someone asked Bob Carey, who is from Nebraska, how he compared himself to William Jennings Bryan, also from Nebraska, and Carey replied, "Well, most importantly, he's dead, I'm not." Barbara Bush once compared herself to Nancy Reagan. "Nancy adores her husband, I adore mine. Nancy fights drugs, I fight illiteracy. She wears size 3, so does my leg." A little bit of lightness, a little bit of laughter. People laugh together after the disaster. You can't laugh alone. Our humor must be shared. And the Love in Action volunteers, they will know the greatest gift is not the deed that is done nor the need that is met, but the laughter that is shared. Whatever our need, whatever our good deed, we're all in this together. We may be only one person in the world, but we may be the world to one person. We do what we can, after the disaster. Find someone who will listen. Who sends that person, because they always show up. Find some way to keep moving. How is it that we see that, because we do. Discover humor, and keep a smile on our face. Where does that come from, after the disaster? A pastor, a move forward faster, and a touch of laughter. Where does that come from? It comes from the source of all good. It comes from God, that's where.