

# Let Earth Receive Her King: **JOY**

*Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11*

1. The year of Jubilee.
2. Despair can lead to new beginnings.
3. We are called to jubilee living.
4. Joy is not circumstantial; joy come from hope and unity.

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West Valley Church  
Michael O'Neill  
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## **Let Earth Receive Her King<sup>1</sup>: Joy** **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

Normally, you wouldn't think people would find Christmas joy in a weed growing out of a crack in the sidewalk.<sup>2</sup> But according to the "Delaware online" news site, that is exactly what happens every year. The article says, "The New Castle County community (in Claymont, Delaware,) has developed a (twenty-five year) tradition around a quirky piece of folklore—[the humble Claymont Christmas Weed](#), which locals decorate every year. Despite its diminutive size and unorthodox locale, it has become a defining centerpiece of the Claymont holiday celebration.

It started back on a slow news day in 1993, when a local newspaper photographer captured an image of a wild fir tree growing out of the cracked pavement of Philadelphia Pike. Neighbors and motorists in passing had adorned it with a few modest ornaments, and the image of the plucky (tree)—dubbed "the Christmas weed" in the headline—did the early 90s equivalent of going viral.

Unfortunately, the photo caught the eye of officials at the Delaware Department of Transportation, who considered it a potential traffic hazard and scheduled it for prompt removal. The DOT's Scroogelike response escalated a community outcry; not only was it promptly replaced several times, but a reporter wrote a sentimental fable about it that was well-received by the general public.

Twenty-five years later, Claymont celebrates the weed with a literal parade of cheerleaders, marching bands, and fire trucks. Resident Barbara Harbin, who organizes the festivities, understands the appeal.

"We say it represents Claymont. We're not pretty, but we're plucky. We are resilient, and we keep coming back."

When I read that article, I wasn't sure if it meant the people of Claymont were resilient, or desperate to find joy in anything.

Joy is often interpreted this time of year in a "holly jolly Christmas" sort of way. Upbeat songs play in every store you enter. Lights and tinsel are placed on every available surface. The glimmer and shine of everything around us can often distract from a harsh reality—the fact that so many of us don't feel very holly jolly this time of year. For many of us, these lights aren't quite bright enough to erase the pain of grief; the darkness of poverty; the loneliness of heartache. There is just not enough tinsel to cover up despair. Some of you might have even walked into church today and, seeing the pink candle of joy being lit by the Lally family, maybe you rolled your

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Talorico, "Claymont Christmas Weed has a Wacky, 25-year History," *Delaware Online* (11-28-18)

eyes a bit at the impossibility of it all, thinking that joy is an unattainable state for those living in darkness.

These are fair thoughts for a day like today, and a text like this text. In this passage from the prophet Isaiah that Jan Bass read earlier, the people of God are lost in hopelessness and despair. Remember that they have returned from exile, only to find their once beautiful city of Jerusalem had been destroyed. Looking over the ruins of their capital city, what was once the jewel of their nation, they are grief-stricken at all they have lost. Not only are they living in the midst of a hopeless situation, not only are they wondering where their peace went—but they are also wondering if there will ever be joy again. Yet, in this world of pain and sorrow, the prophet Isaiah preaches words not just of hope, not just of peace, but words of joy. Good news for all who hear: the pain and sorrow they feel can and will be replaced with unspeakable joy. What you may not know is that in this passage, Isaiah is referencing something called “The Year of Jubilee.” Isaiah is using language and imagery that would have brought this special event to the minds of every Israelite who heard or read what Isaiah said.

### **1. The year of Jubilee.**

Let me take a moment to explain what “the year of jubilee” was, in case you don’t know about it. The “year of Jubilee” was supposed to be a regular part of the Israelite life and ritual and schedules.

Here’s how it worked: every seventh day was what? A sabbath day – a day of rest, a day set apart by God and for God; a day every week that was an opportunity to not work and to show trust in God’s provision for us. Then, every seventh *week* was a week-long celebration called “The Festival of Weeks”. The seventh *month* contained more sacred celebrations than any other month of the year. Then the seventh *year* was a Sabbatical Year, in which they were to let the ground remain fallow for a year. God promised them that the crop during the sixth year would provide enough food and income for both the six and the seventh year. Then, at the end of seven times seven years – the fiftieth year, because it was the year after 49 years – this was called the year of Jubilee. Once more, the land was to remain fallow; they were not to plant or harvest, and in fact they were supposed to allow the poor and the immigrant to glean from what was growing.

That meant that they were not to work the land or harvest from it during the 49<sup>th</sup> year or the 50<sup>th</sup> year; God promised that the crop in the 48<sup>th</sup> year would be enough to feed them and provide for them for three years. But more than that, during the Year of Jubilee, everything was supposed to go back to the original owner. Let me explain:

When the Israelites were rescued from Egypt and finally made it to the promised land, the land was divided up among the twelve tribes of Israel. Right? But the land was not owned by them; the land was owned by God, and each of the twelve tribes were to steward the allotment of land that God let them use. But over the course of

time, there was a very good likelihood that they would run into difficulty, they couldn't pay their debts, and they would have to sell off some of that allotted land. But during the Year of Jubilee, all debts were to be forgiven and all land restored to the original steward – which was the original clan to which the land was allotted by God. Get it? Their entire calendar, economy, spiritual practice, and rhythm of life was tied to their trust in God, to God's loving provision, and to the nature and character of God: that he saves, he provides, he forgives, and he restores.

So the Year of Jubilee was good for everyone. With that in mind, there are four primary *economic* codes for the children of God in Israel.

*First* is tithing: 10 percent of what is made or raised or grown goes into storehouses for the care of the priests and the poor.

*Second* is Sabbath: every seventh day is a day of rest and worship, and every seventh year is one of rest for the land and the animals.

*Third* is gleaning: every year the edges of fields are to be left unharvested in order that the poor, the refugee, and the traveler may find food.

*Fourth* is the Year of Jubilee: after seven cycles of sabbath years (forty-nine years), one year—the fiftieth year—was to be set aside as the Year of Jubilee. The purpose of this year was to reset the entire economic system: debts were to be forgiven, land returned, prisoners set free.

The Bible records evidence that the children of God followed the first three economic laws, but there is no recorded proof that they ever observed the Year of Jubilee. Sadly, that reveals some things about them; like us, they thought that the land and houses and material goods that they possessed belonged to themselves, not to God. So when God told them to let go and to give, they wouldn't do it. They wanted to keep things, and they didn't trust that God would take care of them. But now they were left with nothing, and Isaiah tells them that instead of being depressed by their circumstances, they could find joy, because God was declaring in Isaiah 61 the Year of Jubilee. That title is also called "the year of the Lord's favor," which is what your Bible might say. But it is the same thing. Imagine what good news it would be to experience a Year of Jubilee:

Your debts would be forgiven! That would mean no longer feeling that knot in your stomach when the person you owe comes around. It would mean the ability to invest in new ideas and to follow your passions and pursue what you dream about.

Your family's land would be returned to you! Land ownership would mean security. It would mean a place to grow food and raise animals—two very important things in an agrarian society, where they are the key to survival.

You would be released from prison! Back then, one of the most common reasons to imprison someone was because they couldn't pay their debts. Jubilee therefore meant debt forgiveness and release from captivity for some. This offered the opportunity to start again.

A Year of Jubilee meant a year of grace, hope, and tremendous joy for everyone.

So one of the things God was telling them, and that God wants us to know is that...

## **2. Despair can lead to new beginnings.**

What the people look upon as despair, God wants to use for a new beginning. God is always about new beginnings.

The *hopelessness* of the lost city, of trampled gardens, of burned homes, God is going to transform to *joy*. The ashes of this place are going to be the fertile ground in which new life is born. A crown will replace the ashes.

The place of despair is a place to start over. The year of Jubilee means that right there, in that place of despair is a level playing field that will give them the opportunity to become the people God has called them to be. Do you see in verse three that it says “They will be called oaks of righteousness”? That means they are going to become a righteous people. We talked about this before, but remember that righteousness means right living, especially when it comes to how we look out for and defend each other. This means justice-loving.

The sin and mistakes of their past can be left behind in the rubble, and they can start a new life. Notice verse four: “They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.”

So even though everything *looked* like devastation, they were being called to trust God because God planned to restore them. God had such good things in store for them that they were to start living in a place of trust – it is as if things were so abundant that they were in the year of Jubilee. That means that, for them and for us...

## **3. We are called to jubilee living.**

As you and I look around, we see disease and death and virus and poverty and inequality and abuses of power – it seems as if our social fabric has been ripped to shreds. But according to God’s Word to us through the prophet Isaiah, the children of God are called to participate in the joyful renewal that God is enacting in the world.

Remember that we’ve said that we live in between the Advents; we live in the Kingdom of already and not yet.

That means that even though it is ultimately God who is bringing about healing, hope, and joy, it is clear that humanity is invited to participate in this work.

Verse 3 talks about their righteousness, which implies that they will participate in right actions, living out God’s justice in the world.

Verse 4 says “they will rebuild,” and “they will renew.” The people of God are actively joining God’s restoration work. This means spiritually, relationally, and socially (and within the systems and structures of society).

The people of God are called to do the work of God. Verse 8 talks about how God hates injustice. The implication is that the people of God will act in just ways. Verse 8 also talks about hating wrongdoing but rewarding righteousness and justice. Remember this, too from what we’ve said before: when we think of justice, we immediately think of retribution. Guilty people should be tried and punished. So when someone who is guilty of a crime gets punished or sentenced to prison or even death, we usually say: “Justice was served.” Right? That’s because we define justice as retribution. But God defines justice as *restoration*: that a person who is lost in sin gets saved. A person who is orphaned or widowed gets a family. A person who has sinned can be restored.

One of the ways we see justice and righteousness being enacted in the world is in the ways that God is going to bring about the Year of Jubilee. You can see it in verses one and two that the year of the Lord’s favor will include good news for the poor, binding up of the brokenhearted, freedom from captivity, release from the darkness, and comfort for those who mourn.

These are all active ways that God is going to usher in Jubilee, but the people of God were called – and still are called – to enact these things in the world in partnership with God. The work of Jubilee is a cooperation between God and the people of God. We can see holiness lived out in the ways that God and the people of God work together in bringing about the kingdom of God on earth.

But how do we know that this promise is directly for us? Because we live in the now and the not yet; the Jubilee Kingdom building began with the first Advent but will not be complete until the second Advent. How do we know that?

What did Jesus say about himself? After he had been baptized and the Spirit descended upon him, he went out to the desert for 40 days of fasting and being tempted by the devil. When he walked out of there, he walked into the synagogue on the Sabbath and began his ministry by reading Isaiah 61 – this very passage. Then, Luke 4 tells us this, after Jesus had read this passage:

“Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”  
(Luke 4:20-21, niv)

We are living in the day of the Lord’s favor; we are to live in Jubilee. So that means that...

#### **4. Joy is not circumstantial; joy comes from hope and unity.**

*Joy is ultimately not about circumstances but about the hope of what God is going to do, and the fruit of God and the people of God working together in the world. This is*

our mission as believers in Jesus, living in Jubilee between the Advents – unified together as we act on the hope we have in what God is and will do through us.

We don't know for sure whether Israel ever observed the Year of Jubilee, but whether they did or did not, their calling to celebrate Jubilee didn't change. And, regardless of Israel's faithfulness (or lack thereof), God remains faithful and good, despite their disobedience. God will usher in Jubilee.

The land is destroyed, yet God is at work to transform hardship into beauty. This doesn't negate the hardship or grief but redeems it into something beautiful. This does not mean God caused hardship, but it does mean that God is able to take even the worst situations and bring something good out.

As resurrection people, we also believe that God will ultimately take the worst parts of life – even death – and transform them into life.

God is good despite the circumstances. The passage Jan read talks about God's faithfulness in spite of the unfaithfulness of the people of God. Despite the people putting themselves in such a dire situation, God is still working for their good.

Working together with God brings about good news for the poor and joy instead of mourning.

We can see examples of the way that working for justice and righteousness brings about joy in the world in very real ways:

When a family is freed from cycles of abuse, we see joy.

When hungry people are fed, we see joy.

When those who mourn know they are not alone in their grief, there is joy.

We are called to be joy bringers in the world.

Joining the mission of God in the world shares hope and joy with a world that is often hopeless and filled with despair.

Hopeless-seeming situations are not hopeless for the people of God. Despair can turn to joy.

In the midst of our despair, God is at work. In the midst of our pain, God is at work. Even in the midst of our sin, we are not abandoned. In a world that seeks to cover up pain with tinsel and lights, God seeks to transform pain into glory. God seeks to have life grow from ashes.

We trust, during this Advent season, that Christ came to bring about the kingdom of God in our world, and we have hope that Christ will come again to make all things right. We know the year of the Lord came with Jesus, and is coming in fulfillment when he returns. *We can have joy in that.* We can look for the places that God is already at work, turning ashes into beauty.

But this work of joy in the world is not one we simply watch and wait for—it's one we *participate in bringing about*. Just like the call to Jubilee remained for the Israelites, so too remains our call to join the mission of God in the world. We have the opportunity to be present with those who mourn, to bring light into darkness, to

do the work of justice in our world, to live in righteous ways—that others might also see and know the joy of the Lord.

This is good news for us today. There is unspeakable joy despite our circumstances. But it is good news for the world too. So may we go into the world as bearers of joy, as rebuilders who care for our world—that we might share the good news of great joy that is for all people today, tomorrow, and in the dark days to come.

*Pray*

**Benediction:**

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. (Romans 15:13)

Finally, brothers (and sisters), rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. (2 Corinthians 13:11)