

**GARLANDS FOR ASHES**  
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December 13, 2020  
Third Sunday of Advent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

*Based on Isaiah 61:1-4. The prophet proclaims Jubilee!*

It was Sunday, October 11, 1992, according to this week's *Washington Post Magazine*, when "hundreds of people marched toward the White House carrying urns and bags filled with the ashes of loved ones killed by HIV/AIDS. Through tears and angry shouts," the survivors of God's beloved children struck down too soon, "poured ashes onto the White House lawn. It was the most blunt and direct way they could think of," the *Post Magazine* says, "to confront leaders with the reality of their losses, and to protest what they considered the sluggish and misguided federal response to the epidemic."

"The Ashes Action," it was called back then. This very public protest of grief and loss and anger toward an oblivious government - and an oblivious national population - who deemed gay men "expendable" in a public health emergency.

This October, in the year Two Thousand Twenty, white flags have replaced ashes in our nation's capital. Not as garlands for ashes, in the language of the prophet Isaiah, but as a symbolic graveyard of small white pennants dotting the green grass in front of RFK stadium. An "Arlington Cemetery for the Pandemic," if you will. One flag for every person in the United States killed by COVID-19. Three hundred thousand. The same number of Americans who died on the battlefield in World War Two.

It was supposed to be a day of Joy, this third Sunday of Advent, this day of Jubilee with Isaiah and garlands and gladness and praise. But the other prophet, the one invented by Khalil Gibran in our alternative reading for today, that prophet is also right. In order to know true joy, we must unmask our sorrow. "The mark of a civilized society," says Bertrand Russell, "is the ability to look at a column of numbers and weep."

And so we look at the column of numbers of those we have lost to COVID. Which includes Edgar, the beloved brother of our own Sidney Lewis, and we weep.

And we look at the column of numbers of those whose deaths in this time of pandemic - from causes unrelated to COVID-19 - cannot be properly grieved in community. Which includes our own Duane Alexander. And Genie, the beloved mother of Anne Teresa. And John Schultz, And Hal Snyder. And Jay Holliman. And we weep.

And we look at the column of numbers of those who remain unemployed. And we look at the column of the numbers of those who remain uninsured. And we look at the column of numbers of completely incompetent congressional leaders. And we dare to scream - in a death-denying, always look on the bright side, progress-is-a-linear-line culture - that WE ARE NOT OKAY!

That ashes and sackcloth are not nearly enough to express the depth of our collective grief and anger and experience of betrayal.

And that is just for those of us who still have hope to make it through.

We are not okay ...

Which is exactly where the people of God find themselves in this lesson from Isaiah. Returning home, yes, from a long and bitter exile, only to find that their home is still ruined. Their temple is still destroyed. Their land is still strewn with thickets and weeds instead of the abundance from promise and plenty.

And they have work to do. Even after the crisis is “over.”

In a world that has not yet recovered from utter madness, the prophet Isaiah recovers ancient wisdom. From the heart of the covenant, forged in that other wilderness, in the heart of that earlier journey to the land of promise and plenty. The Jubilee Year, Isaiah decides, is the template for renewal. The “Sabbath of Sabbaths,” when the land lies fallow, and debts are forgiven, and slaves are set free, and land is re-allocated according to need, instead of greed.

This ancient teaching of Jubilee, Isaiah declares, must now become our common vocation. An entire year, in the wake of devastation, devoted exclusively to binding up the brokenhearted. And comforting all who continue to mourn. And anointing the people with the oil of gladness. Even if they don’t quite feel like it yet.

Your only job in the year after such great devastation, Isaiah says, is to let your grief work itself out, until you can honestly bear the mantle of praise.

And it will take you an *entire* year. At least!

But that is not all.

The year of God’s favor, Isaiah insists, includes at least one day of vengeance. A concept we progressive – and privileged – Protestants do not like to hear. But we must.

The year of God’s favor must include God’s vengeance. Not because - in my view - our God is punishing and vengeful. The year of God’s favor includes a day of what feels to so many of us like God’s vengeance *because God is just!*

And because God is just, then the year of God’s favor - the Jubilee - is also about liberating those who are captive. As Isaiah says it is.

And because God is just, then the year of God’s favor - the Jubilee - is also about good news to the oppressed, as Isaiah says it is.

And because God is just, then the year of God’s favor - the Jubilee - is also about forgiving all debts and re-allocating land [and I mean literally re-imagining our relationship with the land on which we worship right here and right now], if the year of God’s favor really is about the *justice* of God, it will feel for many of us as if we are losing even more than we have in 2020!

Because we will be ...

So here we are, friends. On the cusp of a new year. At the end of an awful one. Covered in sackcloth and ashes, if we are honest. Wishing for garlands and gladness aplenty in the year to come.

And the prophet Isaiah calls to us still: you and I - *we* - have a vocation in this world gone mad:

To declare the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Twenty-One the Year of God's Favor.

To proclaim Jubilee in *all* of its fullness.

Not as a lightswitch turned back on to "get back the way things were."

But as an ancient practice of renewal. To bind up the brokenhearted. To comfort all who mourn. To change our way of life. Literally *from the ground up*. So that this time next year, on the third Sunday of Advent, after a full year of releasing and renewing in the Spirit of God, we really are ready to wear a garland instead of ashes.

And so is the rest of Creation.

Amen.