

Jerusalem as a Joy and its People as a Delight

Hespeler, 13 November 2022 © Scott McAndless – Baptism

[Isaiah 65:17-25](#), Isaiah 12, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

Six years less one month ago, we had a very special worship service here at St Andrew's Hespeler. It was special because it was just before Christmas and we were reading some traditional Advent passages. But it was even more special because we got to celebrate a big event – the baptism of Blake's big brother, Rylie.

And I just want to remind you and help you get a perspective on what we were thinking about and concerned about six years ago. You see, I keep all my old sermons. And so, I know exactly what I was talking about that Sunday six years ago.

Blake's family had just returned from out west. Her parents had moved to Alberta after school because things were booming in the oil industry and there were tons of well-paying jobs. But six years ago, things were not looking quite so rosy out in Alberta. The price of oil had crashed on the international market and the Alberta oil patch was struggling. The employment situation was not quite so great and stable anymore.

An Apocalyptic Fire

But there was actually another disaster that was on our hearts and minds at that moment. A huge, and I mean apocalyptically huge, wildfire had swept through the Alberta city of Fort McMurray. It had left so much destruction in its wake that the pictures and the videos terrified us all the way here in Ontario. Do you remember that?

I remember it, especially because Blake's family had just moved back to Cambridge from Fort McMurray. They maybe weren't literally fire refugees, but it had been pretty close. And they certainly brought the scope of that tragedy home to us that day. So, I was trying, on that Sunday six years ago, to see what it was that God might be saying to us at that particular moment in time when there seemed to be a lot to be worried about. That wildfire, we were told, was like a once in a century event – something the likes of which we might never see again – and I wanted us to get some perspective on it.

A Child of Promise

I turned to the scriptures of the day, which spoke (fittingly) of a child of promise being born and how things would look different by the time he came of age. And I spoke about how we might look at things differently by the time that Rylie came to a certain age. This is what I said:

My Prophecy

"The world may change, but this child, like the one born in Isaiah's time and even like Jesus, is a sign to us from God – a sign that means that God is with us."



“How do I know that? I know it because that is how God works. I know it because, by the time this child grows up and is old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the world will have changed. I don’t even know how.

“Trump will not be president of the United States. Trudeau will likely not be our Prime Minister. The economy will have changed, and I wouldn’t mind if oil isn’t such a big part of it. We don’t know.

“But the key thing is that the things we are worried about now, the things we are afraid of, may not matter by then. Yes, maybe we’ll have new things to worry about, but even that may not matter because of one key truth that God has sent Rylie to remind us of: God is with us.”

Not a Great Prophet

I share that with you today with all humility to let you know that I probably would not make a fantastic prophet. I have no idea why I was so sure that Trump would no longer be president. As we know, that wasn’t necessarily a sure thing. And as for my prediction of Trudeau’s longevity in the office, I don’t seem to have gotten that one right. But, in my defense, I was thinking of a time a bit further out than six years.

And I actually think that the main point of my predictions still stands up. It is true that the things that we were so worried about six years ago are not the same things we are worried about today.

What We Were Worried About

And, yes, in some ways that’s because things have gotten much worse. The images of the Fort McMurray fire aren’t quite so shocking today as they were then, but that is actually because there have been so many more wildfires some of which, such as the ones in Australia in 2020, were far more apocalyptic.

And, yes, we’re not so worried about a precipitous drop in the price of oil, but that is actually because the price is now so high that it’s a major driver of the inflation that is worrying us. The things we are anxious about certainly have changed, which means we probably should not invest so much into the specifics of what we worry about. But, alas, it seems, the constant is that anxiety itself never quite goes away.

But enough about the worries of six years ago. We are here today to celebrate something wonderful. We are here to celebrate Rylie’s little sister, Blake, and what her coming among us symbolizes today.

Today’s Worries

And yet, I still feel as if we can’t quite do that without acknowledging some of the anxieties and fears we are living with. I know that many of us look at young families just starting out these days and wonder how they are able to manage it.

With housing prices seemingly continuing to spiral out of control, we wonder how young families can afford to provide decent shelter for their children. With education costs so high, we wonder how they will be able to pay off what they borrowed to get their degrees. With prices so high, we worry about how parents can find the time to spend with their children when they are required to work so many hours just to make ends meet. These are huge issues for families in our times. And they affect us all, so we ought to be concerned about them.

So let us look once again to the promises that God gives to us. Let us take comfort in the faithfulness of our God. We read once again from the Book of Isaiah this morning, but the passage we read was addressed to a very different time.

Judah's Families Under Stress

It was actually a time when the families of Judah were also under enormous stress. The people of Judah were, at that time, people who had been repatriated after being refugees in a foreign land. They had returned to a land that had been devastated by a series of disasters and they were trying to rebuild. It was a difficult time. They were surrounded by enemies, and they had to deal with a series of environmental and economic disasters. Any of that sound familiar?

Inflation of Biblical Proportions!

And do you want to know what one of those disasters was? It was out of control inflation. The Prophet Haggai was also active at this time and this is how he describes the situation: **“You have sown much and harvested little; you eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.”** (Haggai 1:6)

Hmm, it makes me wonder whether Haggai didn't write that description of his feelings after walking through the aisles at Zehrs and taking a look at those prices! **“You that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes.”** Yep, that is what it feels like today.

The Bible is Always Relevant

So, these prophecies were written at a time, in particular, when the families of Judah were really struggling. They didn't know if they were going to be able to pay their bills. They didn't know if they were going to have houses to live in! There is something about the Bible, isn't there, that makes it come up ever fresh and ever relevant to what we are living through in the moment.

So I think we ought to read the promises from Isaiah this morning as promises that speak directly to Blake and her family and indeed to all young families who are dealing with various challenges and trials in our society today.

God's Delight

God speaks through the prophet and says, **“I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.”** That is a powerful message for our time. It tells you that God has a very different orientation when looking at our families than the world at large does.

You see very clearly these days that the world is busy judging us all in terms of our production and our efficiency. We are constantly reminded that our value is found in one thing only – what we can produce for the economy. For that reason, families are left constantly scrambling and working to justify their basic existence.

But it is refreshing to see that God's point of view is so very different. Do you want to know why God values you and your family? It is not because of what you produce. It is not because of your efficiency. God made you as a delight. God created you because God found joy in you. Oh, how I wish we could absorb that lesson in our modern world.

A Housing Promise

But joy and delight alone are not enough to live on, as I think we all recognize. So, let's see what else God is promising the people at a difficult time. **"They shall build houses and inhabit them... They shall not build and another inhabit."** And if there is a message that our society is more in need of than that one, at a time when young families are scraping to pay the rent or afford that down payment and those mortgage payments, I'm not sure what it is.

And what does it mean to have a God who cares about the housing needs of our families? How comfortable should we feel in our homes if we know that their skyrocketing values means that many a family will never be able to afford one of their own? This is a huge problem without simple solutions, of course. But I think it is good and comforting to know that we have a God who cares about this very issue and will push his people to make the necessary change.

Who Benefits from Labour

But it is not just God's concern for housing that we see here. He also promises, **"They shall not plant and another eat, for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands."** That is another big issue we have in our society.

In far too many cases, the people who benefit most from the labour that people do is not the people themselves. With the way that wages are these days, often those who are on the lowest earning tier only find themselves falling further and further behind as they scramble to pay their bills and debts.

Meanwhile, the investor class and the ultra rich who do not need to labour in order to earn their bread are getting richer and richer. I think it's kind of important that God puts Godself on the record here and says that families need to enjoy the fruits of their own labours.

Meeting our Potential

But, by far, the greatest promise that I see in the passage we read this morning is this: **"They shall not labour in vain or bear children for calamity, for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—and their descendants as well."** And that, more than anything else, speaks of God's commitment to our families. God is determined to bless them. God is determined to ensure that every member of every household can achieve their full potential. And God demands the same commitment from us.

God's Commitments to Families

Six years ago we had the opportunity to celebrate a family that had just welcomed its first child – a child who came out of a vision of apocalyptic fire. That child gave us hope for the future. Today we celebrate not only that child's little sister but a family that is more firmly established here. I know that they have challenges before them, not because of anything particular in them but simply because most all families at their stage are facing the same struggles these days.

But let our readings this morning remind us of our God's commitment to families. And let that also become a renewal of our own commitment to support the families of this congregation and this community in a trying time. We can be bold to take on that ministry because we should never doubt God's commitment to it. And so, thank you, Blake, for reminding us of all of that today.