

Faith Mennonite Church  
December 11, 2012 – Advent 3  
“Awesome deeds we do not expect: Transforming our sorrow”  
Joetta Schlabach

**Rejoice, Pray, Give Thanks**  
*Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*

We're midway through Advent. The color of our candle on this third Sunday is rose rather than blue. It signifies rejoicing. We're still waiting, still longing, still mourning, still living in the shadow of empire, still painfully aware of the precarious economy here and all the more in Europe, still numbed by images of war and destruction in so many parts of our world.

Yet the tradition of Advent calls us to rejoice. The scriptures we have read, each from a different geographical and chronological setting, call us to we rejoice. And by showing up and being present today we call one another to rejoice.

Both of our scriptures this morning were written from situations of deep longing. The words from Isaiah 61 are doubly familiar to us because we find them repeated in the Gospel of Luke (4:18) when Jesus reads this scripture in his hometown synagogue at the beginning of his ministry. These words are from the final section of Isaiah, which represents the return and restoration of Israel, following their time in exile and captivity. Yet, these words proclaim a reality that hadn't yet been fully realized. The holy city of Jerusalem, called Zion, still lay in ruin. The community was scattered. Many who have made a new life for themselves in exile were probably wondering if they had the energy to travel home and rebuild. Would the ones who had remained in Israel even be open to the return (and the new ways) of their compatriots who had been carried away?

On occasions when I stop by the Starbucks on Riverside and see the gathering of Somali men and hear their impassioned conversation as they drink coffee, it strikes me that they no doubt understand the dynamics of the setting of these prophetic words far better than we who have always lived in relative safety and stability. I imagine that at least one in their number speaks of hope and holds out a vision for returning and rebuilding their country, even as refugees continue to stream out.

And when I observe younger Somalis, educated in this country and working in business and government, successfully navigating several cultures and languages, they give form to Isaiah's poetic description of strong oak trees, of gardens springing up. Most have never seen the homeland that their parents dream of, yet they too must long deeply for the restoration and healing of their people.

On Friday, Gerald and I had lunch with the MCC regional directors for East Africa who were in town briefly. I shared with them our congregation's experience of offering hospitality to the Edha/Mwenye family this year. They explained that the largest refugee camp in northern Kenya holds some 500,000 people and that most have only a 1 in 400 chance of leaving to resettle in another country. Many try to move to a smaller camp, where the odds are somewhat better—1 in 80. Bob and Judy recounted a recent conversation they had with a man from South Sudan, which gained its independence this summer, following 50 years of war. Although the work of restoration has barely begun, this man had an imagination as vivid as Isaiah's. “When you fly over South Sudan,” he said, “you see the Garden of Eden!”

What feeds this prophetic imagination? From where does this hope and expectation spring? For the writer of Isaiah, the answer lies in the words attributed to God (61:8): “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.” An intimate trust in a God of justice opens the way for the expectation that this God cares and intervenes on behalf of humanity. It is the root of rejoicing.

The Apostle Paul's call for rejoicing was in a setting quite different from that of Isaiah. While the people of a besieged Israel longed for a return to a glorious Zion, the church that Paul had founded in Thessalonica, a primarily Gentile church, longed for the return of Christ. They had joined a movement that had at its center a core belief that the physical return of Christ would happen imminently. This movement had a strong charismatic or Spirit-filled character. In various of Paul's writings to the early churches he founded he refers to gifts of prophesy and of interpreting the voice of the Spirit. No doubt some of the prophesies that were shared included this expectation of the return of Christ. With time, some people who had expected to welcome Christ in this life, were growing old and dying. This began to shake the faith of others. People began to get skeptical when Spirit-filled predictions didn't materialize.

In an earlier portion of this letter, Paul assures the church that it's not problematic for people to die or for Christ's return to be delayed. Paul, no doubt had to adjust his own theology and expectations. What is important to Paul is that the church continues to experience the Spirit of Christ in the life of their community. The first evidence of this is that they are able to rejoice. Rejoice when things are going well *and* when they're not going so well. Rejoice when we have a clear sense of where God is leading *and* when we're not so certain about our direction. For Paul, joy is a character trait of life in the Spirit—not something that we bring out for the holiday season, or save for special occasions. It is a character trait that grows when it is part of a lifestyle that includes two other actions: prayer *without ceasing* and giving thanks *in all circumstances*.

When Paul says to pray without ceasing, I don't think he was suggesting we go about with a laundry list of requests that we repeat all day. Unceasing prayer is rather the watchfulness that is at the heart of Advent. It is training ourselves to notice the life that pushes up through cracks in the sidewalks, the green that springs from dead-looking bulbs. It is hearing God say, "I love justice" and letting that shape our love. It is hearing God say "I hate robbery and wrongdoing" and checking any inclination we might have to wrong another.

This past Wednesday night, Pearl Harbor Day, Gerald and I went to the One Voice Mixed Choir preview concert, "Brave Souls and Dreamers." As I listened to comments during the discussion time that followed, it occurred to me that the past 10 years, since September 11, 2001, have been a kind of exile for our country. It has been a time of disorientation when old myths of greatness and security have fallen away but not yet replaced by a new vision. Changes in the economy and the arrival and growth of new immigrant populations feel like displacement for many, even as they remain in their homes and towns.

What is the word of the prophet in our time? It's tempting to simply rail at the crazies who are railing in the political sphere these days. But we are given a distinct voice: a voice that speaks good news; a voice that believes God desires justice; a voice that envisions a garden growing; a voice that offers hope to those who mourn. As we go about our way and speak this coming week, let us do so with joy, praying always, and giving thanks in every circumstance.

### Transforming Sorrow with Courage and Faith

K and her two youngest children, her 19-year-old daughter, and her 21-year-old developmentally disabled son, flew to the United States a few months ago. Her eldest daughter and middle son had come just six weeks before. They were all born in Somalia, but had lived the last 19 years in a refugee camp in Kenya, so although they dress and identify as Somali, they speak and understand Swahili best. K's oldest son remains in Somalia with his wife and their 3 young children, one born in May, just two months before K and her other four children came to Minnesota.

Sorrow looks like this: leaving the place you've lived for 19 years, and a newborn grandchild, to come to the unknown as an immigrant.

K is a widow and has had no formal schooling. Only her middle son had any education, and that was in Swahili, in the refugee camp. For months now, they have been adjusting to life in Minnesota, without literacy in *any* language. It is hard to learn English, and even basic math skills like the ability to remember their phone number is challenging. Nonetheless, they attend school as English Language Learners every day, struggling to understand and make sense of all the differences in life here.

What would it be like to move out of a refugee camp after 19 years? What would it be like to live where little dots and lines mean things to everyone but me and my children? The presence of sorrow becomes a constant background noise, familiar and unsettling at once. K has a strong faith, and prays five times a day, like most Muslims. How do the prayers answer the practical questions: Who do you trust? Where do you buy food? How do you cook in an American kitchen? What is the money worth? Sixty-five sounds like a lot more than one; yet sixty five cents is less than one dollar—so confusing! Why do we have to wear socks? They feel awful. It's so cold outside; why do we go to school when it's snowing and so cold? Sorrow blends into confusion, becoming a pungent stew difficult to digest. Trust in God. See you again, if God is willing. In-sha-‘Allah.

Listener, hear of a week for K and her brave family: This week, the taxi was late for an appointment to have K's son's heart checked at the hospital. It was rescheduled for the next day, but she went with her daughter instead to have a second tooth pulled. She missed her English class because she had an appointment to apply for subsidized housing in St. Paul; the Minneapolis waiting list for public housing is closed because the wait is over 7 years!

Another letter arrives. What does this letter mean? Oh, it's a "Notice of Continuance" from the lawyer because the court had no Swahili interpreter, only Somali. How can a 26-year-old man with the reading level of a first grader be legally responsible for his 21-year-old special-needs brother? But he is and to make money for the household, he works at a menial job while he learns English, math and basic computer skills; he cares for his mother, two sisters, and his special needs brother. He is warned he should be wary of which mosque he attends (and who he trusts there) because there are allegations of recruiting healthy young Somali men to return to the homeland as warriors.

Freedom and choices and decision-making are so different than they must have been in the refugee camp near the equator where the sun rises and sets at the same time every day! How do you navigate with new pressures of alcohol and glorified media images of violence and alluring images of women? K and her son are resilient and faithful. They stand together. Be prayerful and true and meet God halfway. Transform our sorrow. If God wishes... In-sha-‘Allah.