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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

ADVENT CREDO

The New York Times has released its display of The Year in Photos. You can check them out online. The images are powerful. Charred forests from wildfires, coffins stacked up in funeral homes, mass graves being dug for the dead, police in riot gear and burning buildings from protests turned violent, people on ventilators in hospitals, deserted streets and subways, lines of people at food pantries, angry faces at political rallies, tear-streaked faces of the grieving, hospital workers collapsed in exhaustion, swarms of locusts engulfing a Kenyan farm, a family being evicted.

We don't need the photos to tell us this was a painful year. But the photos make an impact for sure. Seeing the images makes it hard to keep the realities of this year at arm's length or permit ourselves to live in denial. While there were some images of joy and tenderness, the photos were overwhelmingly depictions of the tremendous devastation experienced around the globe this year.

Sometimes at Christmas time we have endeavored to "dress up" our lives and our world to make them seem prettier, happier, more peaceful than they are. But this year, this year there is no pretending that the world is a pretty place. We know differently. The story of our lives, our individual and collective experiences, tell a far different story. The photos of this past year tell a different story.

There are no photos from the time when the Jewish people returned home from exile in Babylon. We can't see images of what they found when they came back and discovered Jerusalem in rubble and their beloved Temple in ruins. We have only our imaginations and the

words we find in the Bible describing their great heartache and despair. Their time in exile had emotionally and spiritually devastated the Jewish people. When they were finally released from their Babylonian captivity they were initially filled with hope and joy. That is, until they arrived back home and discovered their homeland in ruins. You see, before marching the Jewish people to exile, the Babylonians destroyed everything in their path. Thus, it was a bitter homecoming for the Jewish people. The economic and social and political devastation overwhelmed them.

Maybe this year we can relate to our ancient Jewish cousins who stood among the rubble of their former lives and felt deep despair. Like our ancestors, it is understandable for us to conclude that this world is a cold, hard, cruel, and unsafe place. I am certainly not going to deny that reality. This world *is* a cold, hard, cruel, and unsafe place.

For some people, however, the reality that this world is a cold, hard, cruel, and unsafe place becomes a kind of creed that shapes their lives. A creed is a belief or a guiding principle. The word “creed” comes from the Latin the word “credo” which literally means “I believe.” And what a person believes shapes how they live. Some people who subscribe to the credo that this world is a cold, hard, cruel, and unsafe place, who make this their guiding principle, will sometimes sink into a deep despair, believing life is hopeless and pointless. Other people will develop hard and bitter hearts. And some people become ruthless in a quest to seize what comforts or security they can for themselves and their people.

Scripture never glosses over the painful realities of this world. But the Bible never leaves us with *just* the belief that this world is a cold, hard, cruel, and unsafe place. The scriptures do not leave us believing we are abandoned to the darkness of this world. The scriptures do not leave us believing there is no God who cares for us in our suffering or that this God is untrustworthy.

In the scripture passage we read today, the prophet Isaiah speaks to the Jewish people who have returned home from exile to find their homeland in rubble and ruin. And Isaiah offers them a different credo for their lives than what they see before them. Isaiah makes an audacious claim in the face of their devastation—the belief and a trust in a good and loving God.

Isaiah speaks about God sending a special person to the Jewish people—we don't know for sure who that person is. Perhaps it is the prophet Isaiah himself. Or perhaps it is someone else. But this person is sent by God to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to offer comfort to those who mourn and hope to those in despair. And there is talk of building up the ancient ruins of their lives and repairing the ruined cities. It is an audacious claim that professes a belief in a good God who brings new life out of devastation. It is a kind of creed, a statement of belief, a guiding principle for what God is doing in this cold, hard, cruel, and unsafe place.

Centuries later, Jesus would quote these very words from Isaiah at the start of his ministry. Jesus stood before the people in the synagogue—poor people, people living under oppression, people struggling to fill their bellies with food, people living with grief and hardship—Jesus stood before such people and stated: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” And after Jesus read these words from Isaiah, he sat down and told the crowd, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus gave them a different credo for their lives. And then he made this credo real and tangible by how he lived and loved and cared for others.

The famous Jesuit priest, anti-war activist, and author Daniel Berrigan wrote a statement he called *Advent Credo*. No doubt this credo served as a guiding principle for his life in his relentless efforts in advocating for peace and standing for the oppressed. This is what Berrigan writes:

Advent Credo:

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—
This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—
This is true: I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—
This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful councilor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—
This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—
This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this history—
This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ—the life of the world.

In the face of all life's great pain and darkness, Advent offers you and me a different credo for our lives. Our guiding belief in life lies with a trustworthy and loving God who enters

our brokenness to heal and restore. This credo shapes how we live our lives. Imagine with me that Isaiah directs his words to you and to me. Isaiah says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon *you* because God has anointed *you* to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed. God has anointed *you* to bind up the brokenhearted and to release people from all forms of captivity. God has called *you* to comfort those who mourn in Zion, and in Buffalo, and in Amherst, and in Tonawanda. God calls *you* to be an oak of righteousness, and to repair the devastations of generations of injustice, and racism, and white supremacy. God has anointed *you*.”