

A Sermon for Advent III, Year B  
Christ Church (Episcopal), Detroit  
December 14, 2008  
The Rev. Robert L. Hart  
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11  
Psalm 126  
I Thessalonians 5: 16-24  
John 1: 6-8, 19-28

+May the God of Peace sanctify us as we await the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In early January of 1992 the red flag of the Soviet Union was lowered over Russia for the last time. For the first time in seventy years, Christmas, celebrated on January 7<sup>th</sup> in Russia, was once again a legal holiday. I arrived for my first visit to that country the day after the red flag came down. Some of the signs in the city still read Leningrad, but already there were new ones restoring the old name, St. Petersburg.

The Russian Orthodox Church after a seventy year long exile and persecution began to reclaim normal church life throughout the country. What I discovered was that the seeds of Christian action and practice had been carefully planted throughout all those years of official atheism. The first thing the church did was restore its ministry to the poor, the homeless, the sick and the innumerable elderly widows of the cities. I visited church run soup kitchens, aid projects for impoverished pensioners, church sponsored start up businesses for women and an orphanage. Despite the seventy years of atheistic propaganda the people had planted the seed, the words spoken by Isaiah today, "For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing."

The government gave back the old churches it had seized. On that first Christmas that marked the churches return from exile I participated in a Christmas liturgy celebrated with a makeshift altar and icon screen in a church that the state had used as a

produce warehouse and as a morgue during WWII. I saw Christians worshipping in churches that until weeks before had been a tank repair shop and one that had been an incinerator for defective plastic toys. You can imagine what it looked like on the inside. All these magnificent old churches the parishioners themselves were restoring and rebuilding.

Christmas in Russia of that year was sparse but as beautiful as any I've ever known. Christmas Eve I stood in a large, ornate church that had remained open for most of the years of persecution. The Russians have no seats or pews in the churches. We stood shoulder to shoulder, a vast crowd of young and old singing the Christmas Liturgy openly and with hearts filled with gratitude. For God has given them "...a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit."

Russian Christians knew the biblical story. It came alive for them in ways unimaginable to us. During that year they returned to the story of the exile of the Jews in Babylon, an exile that lasted seventy years. That story of God and his people paralleled their story, their relationship with God. The conquering Babylonians had carried the Jews and the citizens of Jerusalem away to Babylon. The Temple and city of Jerusalem lay in ruins. After seven decades it was the great Persian king Cyrus who allowed them to return and rebuild their city, their nation and their lives of faith. That is why you heard the prophet sing this morning, "They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations."

Coming closer to home, this week my wife, Becky, helped host a visiting video artist of international reputation. He is looking at Detroit as the site for his next project. This artist got a thorough tour. He fell in love with the city in all its glory and devastation. But what is it he saw? He saw: the Guardian Building in its art deco splendor and the Majestic Theater with its proscenium arch now spanning a parking garage. He toured the

River Rouge Plant and in particular the vast steel mill, operating at 50% capacity. Other steel plants he wanted to visit were closed, maintained by skeleton crews. At one the remaining workers were pouring left over molten steel on the ground as they feathered the plant awaiting better days. This artist with his artist's vision saw the ruins and the magnificence of American urban industrial civilization.

Manohla Dargis, the film reviewer for the NY Times, wrote about Clint Eastwood's new film, *Gran Torino*, set here in the Detroit area. This was on Friday. Here's what Dargis said, "a sleek, muscle car of a movie Made in the USA, in that industrial graveyard called Detroit." "Melancholy is etched in every long shot of Detroit's decimated, emptied streets and in the faces of those who remain to still walk in them." "... an industry that now barely makes cars, in a city that hardly works, in a country that too often has felt recently as if it can't do anything right anymore..."

I don't think good writing necessarily improves one's mood. It just makes the pain more exquisite.

The exile of the Russian Church saw the destruction of vast and beautiful edifice, a spiritual Zion for a nation. For the Jewish people their exile in Babylon was made bitter by the memory of the ruin of their Temple, the center of their faith and nation and of Jerusalem, the city that was the symbol of God's peace and favor. In both cases, the Russian Church and the Jewish people, the promise of God was heard, heard as a voice of hope and a call to action.

"They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. For I the Lord love justice..." I also hear those words along with what the psalmist said, "Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves." There will be a time of harvest.

We need, however, the rest of the biblical story, to bring it to conclusion. The Jews came home from exile. They walked back. When they saw the devastation, some of them lost heart. But they

had a leader and the leader had a plan. This was Nehemiah. Nehemiah trusted God and he tackled first things first. He rebuilt the walls of the city. For once the city was defined and protected, the rest of the work could begin.

As soon as the people began to work, they began to trust. God's promise to them might just have substance. And so it was. In time Jerusalem was rebuilt, the Temple restored, a new chapter opened in the life of the Jewish people.

We too look out at ruins and devastations. But we know better than anyone it's not all like that. No city, no church that sits astride one of God's great waterways and has roots deep in over 300 years of creative, innovative work and faithful worship can not but believe that God will do a new thing. God has promised a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning. We must hear this as a call, a vocation. Rebuilding takes time, takes generations. If nothing else we plant the seed. Maybe we can lay the foundations of the city walls. Some of us will live to see the Temple. But it all rests on faith, patience, imagination and hard work.

This is the season of the Light of the world. The light enters the darkness and the darkness cannot quench the light of God. We are children of this light. We are light bearers, beacons of hope in the city.