

A Change is Gonna Come
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

It seems that this Advent I've had a playlist running through my head. Certain songs set off by certain feelings and certain situations. You may have heard me whistling some of these at community dinners or between services on Sunday. These songs have crept their way into my sermon preparation. In order to be prepared for the Advent season, I had to get my sermon titles and thoughts together at the end of November. It was nearly a month ago now but as I was looking at this reading for week three of Advent a particular song came on. As I was reading through these hopeful words from Isaiah these lyrics were floating in the air:

I was born by the river in a little tent
Oh, and just like the river I've been running ever since
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes it will
It's been too hard living, but I'm afraid to die
'Cause I don't know what's up there beyond the sky
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes it will
I go to the movie and I go down town
Somebody keep telling me don't hang around
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes it will
Then I go to my brother
And I say, "Brother, help me please."
But he winds up knockin' me
Back down on my knees
There been times that I thought I couldn't last for long
But now I think I'm able to carry on
It's been a long, a long time coming
But I know a change gon' come, oh yes it will

These are the lyrics to the song "A Change is Gonna Come" by Sam Cooke. This song was released in December of 1964 and it was inspired by events that Cooke experienced in his life. It was a time of civil unrest in the country and as a black man he experienced discrimination. This song sprung out of that mistreatment, reaching its boiling point when Cooke was refused service at a "whites only" motel in Louisiana. This song became a symbol of the Civil Rights movement as it balanced the realities of the time with the vision of a hopeful future.

This is where we are at today as well. We are still facing the harsh realities of the day with the hope and promise of a brighter future. We are not in the Christmas season, we are in the Advent season and Advent is this season where we stop, recognize our circumstances, and cling tightly to the promises that God gives us. We put ourselves in the shoes of the Israelites, longing for the promised Messiah. We place ourselves into the circumstances of our faith ancestors waiting for the Lord to deliver on his promises. Those promises can't be more clear than in our reading from Isaiah. He promises freedom, acquittal, comfort, joy, and an end to mourning. But just like the ancient people of God, we are waiting. We are waiting for the full deliverance on those promises. We are still waiting for all to be made right, for all mourning to cease, for all death to be defeated, for all tears to be wiped away. So we stand here, in this moment, longing for Jesus, aching for his return because of what is around us. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will.

The world itself feels this longing even if they don't see Jesus as the answer. I was reading an article this week about a woman who defected from North Korea and was testifying to the atrocities she saw in her country. Ji Hyeon-A had been tragically sent back to North

Korea on three separate occasions by Chinese authorities after defecting. She eventually made it to freedom in South Korea but not before seeing and experiencing horrible things. She was forced by the North Korean government to have an abortion on her three month old, unborn baby. She witnessed people being beaten and tortured in prison, the dead bodies of prisoners being fed to guard dogs. Nightmare scenarios that seem to have no end in sight. Escape, fleeing for your life is the only solution to something that appears so unfixable. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will.

As I sat down to write this sermon on Thursday, I watched the news and trending topics on twitter roll in. Thursday was the 5 year remembrance of the shootings in Newtown, Connecticut. I'm sure we all vividly remember the chaos surrounding that day. I can still picture the images in the aftermath of that terrible incident when a young man shot and killed 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Senseless violence driven by mental illness and anguish ending with the shooter killing himself. The massacre still leaves people wondering, confused and frustrated, saddened and longing for resolution. Five Christmases have gone by for those parents. Five birthdays. More years to come of grief, robbed of joy by gunpoint. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will.

Each of you has a story. Each of you have scars that you cover up. Each of you have had to redo your eyeliner or quickly use your sleeve to wipe away tears and make yourself presentable to the world. Each one of you has felt loss. Each one of you has watched tragedy unfold on the tv screen, around the dining room table, while laying in bed. These nightmare scenarios replaying over and over in your mind, keeping you up and stealing your joy. We keep ourselves busy to distract us from these things. We keep moving, faster and faster, because if we stop for just a moment then they'll all begin to settle again and weigh on our minds and hearts. You lost dad way too early. You don't know how to get through to your niece that is slowly destroying himself. You can't chase away the things inside yourself that cause you to sin, that cause depression and darkness. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will.

What makes all of this so hard is that it all feels so unsolvable. Whether globally or personally the things that keep us up and trouble us are the things we can't control, the things that seem to have no quick fix. Resolution doesn't come to a lot of these deep wounds that we have. People tell you to pick yourself up and get over it but you just can't. A few years ago, I did the committal service for a little girl in our church's preschool who died unexpectedly. Three years old and she just died. No explanation. No understanding. No resolution. It broke my heart to stand over that little pink casket. Stuck wondering what happened and what to do next. We were in a section of the cemetery that should never exist, one dedicated to children, and as I walked back to my car after the service I noticed the graves around me. What broke my heart even more was seeing fresh flowers on the grave of a child that died in 1974. A brand new stuffed bear leaning up against a grave marker from 1986. These pains don't go away. These hurts don't just vanish. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will.

This is where the rubber meets the road folks. The point at which all falls apart is the moment where God begins to speak. Despair and darkness is around us and if we stop to notice it in the world and in ourselves we will begin to long for relief. We wait and ache and groan for repair and so often it seems as if the response is silence. But what seems unsolvable now will not always remain that way. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will. God speaks into our darkness. God speaks into our dejection. God speaks into our anger, our frustration, our loneliness, and desperation. Hope is on the horizon. It truly is. Hear God speak to us, his people, through the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness

instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. 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 hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations."

You know what that says to me? You know what that says to you, you wrestling with hurts and pains? It says that a change is coming. It is God declaring loudly that there is more coming. It is God leaning down from heaven and speaking into each of our lives that this isn't the end. He hasn't forgotten. He hasn't forgotten you or his promises. This pain you feel will have a resolution. These hurts you hold onto will eventually dissolve. The death that shakes you, the cancer that riddles your bones, the family members that have shut you out. All of that will be changed. God is going to bind you up. He's going to set you free. He's coming and with him comes a redemptive change that alters the universe. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will. And even if it doesn't happen today, or tomorrow, or in your lifetime it will come. Just like we were reminded last week, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness." The timing is not ours but the promises are. God is coming. He's coming in glory, a divine repairman with every tool imaginable to put your life and this world back together.

In Advent we have the joy of looking back at God's arrival. We have the confidence to peer into the past and see God coming in Jesus. It was a long time coming for his people but change did come. It came in the form of a baby in Bethlehem. Change came blowing in like a rushing wind once in royal David's city. The herald angels sang. Kings and shepherds knelt before him. Heaven and earth rejoiced at the coming King, Jesus Christ born in a manger. God did come. Change came in the Son of God. As He grew he showed what that change would look like. He challenged the temple. He reached out to the downcast, the sinners, the isolated, the unworthy and destitute. Change came as Jesus showed us the law, as he showed us God's love. Change came as he became the true sacrificial lamb, painting his blood on the wood of the cross so that death would pass over us. Change came as Jesus died on our behalf. Change was accomplished as Jesus cried out "it is finished" from the beams of that cross. Change came as Jesus didn't stay dead. Change came as he rose victoriously from the grave showing his power over even death itself. Change came through Jesus. It was a long, a long time coming but change did come. Rescue came. Deliverance came. Redemption came as God came down. God brought that promised Messiah to his people. He delivered them from slavery to sin and gave them a path to salvation through Jesus. The sin that seemed so unfixable, so insurmountable now removed completely by Jesus, clearing our way to our Heavenly Father.

But with that we know change is still coming. We live in the now and not yet. We look around this world knowing that things need to change and no policy, procedure, or politician will provide the relief that you need, that you hope for, that you long for so desperately. On long, cold nights we hope for the arrival of the Son of God. In our darkest depressions we hope for the return of the Light of the World. As wars rage on across the globe and in ourselves we hope and pray for the Prince of Peace to come back to us. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will. And God is coming again, bringing with him a permanent change. Jesus has promised a return back to us, a magnificent return that brings with it a new heaven and a new earth, an end to fear, sin, and doubt, a death to death. There's going to be a great rejoicing. Troubles of this world will wither up and die.

That river of tears made by the lonely one day will be dry. It's been a long, a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come, oh yes it will. And you don't have to take my word for it. We hear it straight from God's Word. We've seen in human history that God does intervene on behalf of his people. He's done it and he will do it again, once and for all. Putting to rest all restlessness. Binding up the broken hearted. Freeing the captive. Comforting those who mourn. Ushering in justice and destroying all sin, evil, and wrongdoing.

This had me thinking about one more song, a familiar Advent hymn that we often sing on autopilot. O Come O Come Emmanuel. And ransom captive Israel. That mourns in lonely exile here. Until the Son of God appear. O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free. Thine own from Satan's tyranny. From depths of Hell Thy people save. And give them victory o'er the grave. O come, Thou Day-Spring, come and cheer. Our spirits by Thine advent here. Disperse the gloomy clouds of night. And death's dark shadows put to flight. The longing we feel is expressed in these ancient lyrics. The need for God. The need for deliverance, salvation, extrication, release from captivity. The need for liberation beyond our circumstances that seem hopeless with no resolution in sight. We join with the people of Israel in those cries for emancipation. The refrain that repeats after each verse is the same: rejoice, rejoice Emmanuel shall come to thee O Israel. It is God speaking truth into each of our lives. Just as he spoke comfort to his people long ago, he says the same to us. Rejoice. Rejoice. I've come to save you. Rejoice. Rejoice. I am coming back for you. Rejoice. Rejoice. This pain isn't forever. Rejoice. Rejoice. I intend to fix all that is broken. Rejoice, even in your heartaches. Rejoice, even in your sadness. Rejoice, even in the midst of your darkest moments because I am coming. I haven't forgotten. You are not lost. You are not abandoned. I have not removed myself from you. I'm coming. It's been a long, a long time coming but I promise you a change is gonna come, oh yes it will. Amen.