

What about the brokenhearted? (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126)

Unabated cultural frivolity rules our churches, too.

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What becomes of the brokenhearted?

Think of it as a multiple choice question:

- a. They make all-new angel wings for the Christmas pageant.
- b. They sit stiffly in the pews, biting the insides of their cheeks.
- c. They weep quietly while the candlelight is being passed.
- d. They stay home, but everyone else is too busy to notice.
- e. They wonder why no one else wonders how they are feeling.

Unless we have lived through December heartbroken, it may not cross our minds how hard the lead-up to Christmas can feel for people in the midst of loss, failure, or hopelessness. Their imprisonments can look like being stuck in a dead-end job or a bad relationship; they might be crushed by grief or weighed down by depression. The unabated cultural frivolity cannot be avoided. It decorates our grocery stores, coffee shops, and town squares. It dominates our print, digital, and broadcast advertising.

And it rules our churches. Even in places where Advent is strictly observed and carols are held back for Christmas Eve, the background preparations for Christmas must take place. We must organize ourselves to provide hats and mittens to underprivileged children in the community and gifts to the local nursing home or

county jail in a timely fashion. We must schedule rehearsals of cantatas and plays and concerts in order to make a worthy offering of our talents. We must check the supply of Christmas Eve candles and circulate order forms for Christmas poinsettias.

All this happens alongside what the Grinch described as the "noise, noise, noise, noise," and we hear it not just in Whoville but in Everytown. We move through December juggling party invitations or a lack of them, Christmas TV specials, and commercial assurances that everything will fall into place if you give—or receive—the perfect diamond ring. You would have to be a hermit not to hear about Christmas, and a robot not to have some sort of feelings about the season, past or present. (Remember, the Grinch's problem was a heart problem.)

What a gift it is, then, to be reminded by Isaiah that the Messiah will not come to congratulate the happy couples, or high-five the winners, or bend an elbow with the successful. He will come to walk with the widow, to comfort the lost, and to take to his knees with the oppressed. Mark this. The prophet promises release, liberty, comfort, rebuilding, binding up of the brokenhearted, and restoration of what has been lost. This is the good news.

Let's look around, then, for who is not among us, or who is over-functioning, or who is simply too still or too quiet. Maybe we have been the ones, in some years past. Maybe some Advent future will hold that time for us. In this December present, let's live out the good news in some small way. Let's wonder how other people are feeling and offer them the oil of gladness, the phone call of comfort, the chai of concern.

"May those who sow in tears," says the psalmist, "reap with shouts of joy."