

## Podcast Transcript

12.11.2022 and Advent 3A

- **Isaiah 35:1-10**, Psalm 146:5-10 or Luke 1:46b-55, James 5:7-10, Matthew 11:2-11

<<Music: “Building Up a New World,” 1st verse, fade out under opening sentence.>>  
<<“We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.”>>

[Intro and Transition:]

[Intro:]

- Hi everyone. Welcome back to The Word Is Resistance, the podcast where we’re exploring what Christian sacred texts have to teach us about living, surviving, even thriving in the context of empire, tyranny, violence, and repression - the context in which we are living today. Through Christian scripture and our various traditions, what guidance can we find and imagination can we practice, as white folks, about our role in resistance, in showing up, in practices of repentance and liberation?
- My name is Rev. Liz Kearny. My pronouns are she/her. I am an ordained Presbyterian Church U.S.A. pastor and hospital chaplain serving on the occupied ancestral homelands of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe in so-called Longview, Washington. I’m a member of the SURJ Faith organizing team and this is my first offering as a member of the mighty Word Is Resistance podcast group! I come to you today with lots of delighted “long-time listener, first-time caller” energy! The Word Is Resistance podcast has been informing my own preaching, worship leadership, and community organizing for over a year now, and I feel wildly privileged to join the conversation with all of you in a new way!
- This podcast is a project of SURJ Faith and is particularly designed for white Christians—white Christians talking to other white Christians about race and white supremacy. We believe white Christians have a responsibility to commit ourselves to resisting white supremacy, to speaking up and showing up and disrupting white supremacy where we find it, especially through the Christian tradition.
- This live recording of Dr. Vincent Harding’s song for the freedom movement is of a multi-racial “movement choir practice” in Denver, CO in December 2014, being led by Minister Daryl J. Walker. We are deeply grateful to the Freeney-Harding family for letting us use the song for this podcast.

[Transition:]

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of “Building Up a New World.”>>

<<“*Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don’t get weary, though the way be long.*”>>

[Main Content:]

The lectionary passage we will be looking at today comes from the prophet Isaiah, chapter 35, verses 1-10. Scholars debate the audience of this chapter of Isaiah, but some agree that it was actually supposed to be the opening for *Second* Isaiah, which appears in the Christian Bible as chapters 40-55. First Isaiah (generally thought to be chapters 1-39, which *should* include our text today) was all about the 8th century prophet Isaiah trying to get God’s people to repent, to turn around and walk in a new direction of justice, so that they could *avoid* the situation they find themselves in in Second Isaiah - the Babylonian exile between 587-539 BCE. And so, as you’ll note when I read this text for us, the tone of chapter 35 is one of hope, which doesn’t fit with the “come on! Turn around, y’all!” tone of the First Isaiah passages all around it. The passage today is written to help those living in exile - those drowning in hopelessness - to connect again to the promises of God for a future of abundance and healing. I invite you to open your spirit now for these words from the prophet to a weathered, wounded, and weary people...

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.

They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.

4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
‘Be strong, do not fear!

Here is your God.

[God] will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.

[God] will come and save you.

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;

6 then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;

7 the burning sand shall become a pool,

and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
 the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
 the grass shall become reeds and rushes.  
 8 A highway shall be there,  
 and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
 the unclean shall not travel on it,  
 but it shall be for God's people;  
 no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.  
 9 No lion shall be there,  
 nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
 they shall not be found there,  
 but the redeemed shall walk there.  
 10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
 and come to Zion with singing;  
 everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;  
 they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
 and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.  
 This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God.

- This viscerally beautiful vision, poem, doxology, whatever we want to call it, connects to us in our bodies, doesn't it? If I slow down, I can feel it on my skin - dry sand, burning and irritating the soles of my feet at first, but then turning to a cool, watery pool. I can smell it - wilderness-turned-lush-marshland with new kinds of aquatic life and gorgeous flowers blooming, a fragrance reminding me of a full-on spring day in May.
- If we accept that the first people to engage with this text were people who had been living through the exile in Babylon, it makes the fleshy, incarnate experience of this text even more profound, since the oppression they were living through played itself out in their very bodies. I'm deeply grateful to The Word Is Resistance podcast team for opening up to me the world of disability justice as a lens through which to read our sacred texts. If you missed that disability justice series, go back to Rev. Anne Dunlap's episode kicking off that series on June 19th 2022 and dive in. That lens helped me understand that texts like these - which speak of "the eyes of the blind [being] opened... the ears of the deaf unstopped... the lame [leaping] like a deer... the tongue of the speechless [singing] for joy" - have often been used by preachers like me to erase the lived experiences of actual people with disabilities in our communities. Disability justice activist and theologian Amy Kenny puts it this way in her book *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church*, "We read healing narratives as eradicating disability (curing) without considering the broader social implications (healing). We omit the disabilities of Moses, Jesus, and Paul when telling their stories... We equate sin with disability despite

Jesus telling us otherwise. Yet disability is not always cured or killed off in Scripture. Disability acts as a blessing, a revelation, and a prophetic witness to the community. It even becomes a mark of the covenant for Jacob, who becomes disabled at a crucial phase of the narrative. His disability acts as the catalyst for radical transformation.”<sup>1</sup>

- With that critical lens in mind, it’s also important to understand that some of these comments in the text are referring to the reality that many of the people Isaiah is speaking to had been physically maimed as a result of the warfare that led to their exile. King Zedekiah, for example, while trying to escape Jerusalem as the Babylonian army laid siege to the city in 2 Kings 25, was captured and brought to the king of Babylon, where they slaughtered his sons right in front of him and removed his eyes, blinding him and then binding him in fetters and carrying him off to Babylon.
- Our disability justice reading of this text helps us - in the midst of these horrifying details - to remember that the bodies of our disabled siblings are already whole - it is *systems of oppression like the war-machine of the Babylonian empire* that are at the root of the ways they are targeted and excluded. How many of our beloveds come home from fighting in America’s constant wars with limbs missing and PTSD? How many of our kinfolk die from completely preventable conditions because rich lawmakers consider healthcare a benefit for those laboring in a capitalist system, not a human right afforded to every last one of us? How many have been murdered or permanently injured by police because of our American obsession with punishing people to address harm instead of investing in the kind of community care that could transform where that harm comes from in the first place?
- It is to these folx - the ones most impacted by the Babylonian war machine and the systems of oppression at work to uphold it - that Isaiah is speaking. So what does this passage have to say to them? What does this passage have to say to us, especially white folx who are finding our way into the movements for liberation led by those whose bodies are most targeted by these systems of violence?
- The gift for all of us in these words, I think, is DISRUPTIVE JOY. As theologian Barbara Lundblad puts it, this passage from Isaiah is “...a word out of place,”<sup>2</sup> or as scholar Walter Bruggemann says, this doxology is “characteristically against the data.”<sup>3</sup>
- As I mentioned earlier, we literally don’t even know why this text is placed here, 5 chapters too early - it was supposed to be right before chapter 40! We aren’t sure if one of the later editors got this placement wrong for some reason, but I think it’s a damn good

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability in the Church*, “Disability Blessings,” pgs. 76-77

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Lundblad, *Commentary on Isaiah 35:1-10*, December 15, 2013, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-isaiah-351-10-3>

<sup>3</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *Exilic Preaching: Testimony for Christian Exiles in an Increasingly Hostile Culture*, pg. 37.

metaphor for the kind of disruptive joy we're talking about here. Unexpected streams bursting forth in the desert. Unruly blossoms coming out of nowhere. Wild, reckless, outrageous, loud, gorgeous, and not at all where they are supposed to be.

- It's a disruptive joy that comes to God's people as a complete reversal of the exile they are living through. Their current sighing and weeping will turn into singing. The places where they feel weak right now will become places they feel strong. Mary's protest song in Luke 1- which is also a possible lectionary reading for this Sunday of disruptive joy - is a perfect match, as she cries out that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly... [filling] the hungry with good things, and send[ing] the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53).
- It's a disruptive joy that carves a highway right through the wilderness, right through our doubt, our fear, our feelings of stuckness that tells us "nothing is ever going to change." This highway - this Holy Way as the text calls it - is a road so wide and welcoming that not even fools like me can go astray. A dear Methodist colleague of mine has pointed out that where this passage says "the unclean shall not travel on it," a better translation from the Hebrew would actually be that "the unclean SHALL NOT PASS IT BY." That means it's the kind of road for *everyone*, the kind where all are beloved, the kind where *no one is thrown away*.
- Isaiah's whole goal is to remind folx who are oppressed of what is still possible, to help them feel in their bodies what freedom will look like, sound like, smell like, taste like when God makes good on God's promises. Because if Isaiah can help them remember this in their bodies, maybe it will give them the small burst of energy they're going to need right now, today, to take just one more step in the direction of making God's liberation dreams come true.
- There's a modern-day Isaiah I remembered as I was prepping this podcast. Her name is Junauda Petrus and she is an activist and writer who wrote the poem "Give the Police Departments To The Grandmothers" following the police murder of Michael Brown in 2014. She lives near 38th Street and Chicago Avenue in Minneapolis, where George Floyd was murdered by the police. She writes in her poem, "Could we please give the police departments to the grandmothers? Give them the salaries and the pensions and the city vehicles, but make them a fleet of vintage corvettes, jaguars and cadillacs, with white leather interior." She says the speakers would be booming with Patti Labelle, Stevie Wonder, Anita Baker, and Al Green. "If you up to mischief," she says, "they will pick you up swiftly in their sweet ride and look at you until you catch shame and look down at your lap. She asks you," Petrus writes, "if you are hungry and you say 'yes' and of course you are." Petrus says in this vision, "there are no precincts. Just love temples, that got spaces to meditate and eat delicious food. Mangoes, blueberries, nectarines, cornbread, peas and rice, fried plantain, fufu, yams, greens, okra, pecan pie, salad and lemonade. Things that make your mouth water and soul arrive." "Grandma knows what oppression

has done to our souls,” Petrus writes, “and is gonna change it one love temple at a time. She has no fear.”<sup>4</sup>

- Again I say that this viscerally beautiful poem connects to us in our bodies. In Petrus’ imagined future, a world where we have fully divested from police and prisons and fully invested in the sorts of community spaces and resources that make us truly safe, she helps us taste what the food will be like and hear what real accountability will sound like and feel what it will be like when wise elders bring us along with care. And listen to what she says about writing this poem for her community: “I wrote the poem out of a sense of deep sadness and depression and despair,” Petrus said. “And it’s so funny because most of my poems are actually very emo and kind of heavy. And [this] poem is actually kind of silly and joyful, even though it’s talking about taking the police department which brings a lot of pain.”<sup>5</sup> I’m linking the article interviewing Petrus about this poem in the show notes, and if you read it, you’ll learn about how she and her wife are regularly targeted by the police as Black folx living in their community. And they have their daughter to explain that to. Petrus and her family are living as exiles in this land that’s supposed to be home for all of us. And into this wasteland created by the prison industrial complex and racial capitalism, she responds with a poem of disruptive joy. She helps the folx most impacted by this violence in her community to see, taste, smell, and feel on their skin what liberation will be like. Because if she can help them remember this, maybe it will give them the small burst of energy they’re going to need right now, today, to take just one more step in the direction of making these liberation dreams come true.
- And y’know what? This juicy, flavorsome, wildly abundant liberation is not for just some of us - it’s for *all* of us. Contrary to the lies repeated by far-right news pundits and the continued fear-based investments in policing by mainstream Democrats, divesting from systems of punishment and investing in the real safety of fully housed, fed, and cared for communities will lift up white folx right along with communities of color, especially poor white folx who have been told the scarcity story that there are not enough resources to go around. Isaiah, and Janauda Petrus, remind us of the truth - the story God has always been telling God’s people - that this world is abundant and overflowing with goodness and pleasure enough for us all.
- What stops white folx from joining oppressed communities in imagining and building up these embodied spaces of disruptive joy? Because let’s not forget what we have to gain

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<sup>4</sup> Janauda Petrus, “Give the Police Departments to the Grandmothers,” Video: <https://vimeo.com/426276718> , artist website:

<https://www.janauda.com/can-we-please-give-the-police-department-to-the-grandmothers>

<sup>5</sup> Maya Edmonds and Freya Hauer, “South Mpls. poet stirs the imagination with poem about police reform - Janauda Petrus asks: What if we ‘give the Police Department to the grandmothers?’”, December 28, 2020,

<https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/12/28/south-mpls-poet-stirs-the-imagination-with-poem-about-police-reform>

here: JOY! SINGING! ABUNDANCE! STREAMS IN THE DESERT! BLOSSOMS IN THE WILDERNESS! TABLES FULL OF GRANDMA'S BEST FOOD WHERE EVERYONE HAS A SEAT! MUSIC THAT MAKES OUR BODIES WANT TO MOVE! PRACTICES OF ACCOUNTABILITY THAT GET TO THE ROOT OF THE HARM! A COMMUNITY THAT CARES FOR ONE ANOTHER! That's what we have to gain.

- Right here, where we least expect it, on this Advent Sunday often celebrated as the Sunday of Joy, we are invited to feel in our bodies what real liberation will be like for ourselves and for this good earth. We light that wild pink candle on the Advent wreath, and maybe, just maybe, it will give each of us the little burst of extra energy we need to take one more step in the direction of freedom for all of us. Amen.

<<Music interlude, verse 2 of "Building Up a New World.">>  
<<"Courage, sisters, brothers, people: don't get weary, though the way be long.">>

[Call to Action and outro:]

[Call to Action:]

- For our call to action this week, I invite you to learn about and connect to a mutual aid project in your own community! Mutual aid, in the words of activist Dean Spade, is "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them." Dean reminds us of classic examples, like "people raising money for workers on strike, setting up a ride-sharing system during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, putting drinking water in the desert for migrants crossing the border [streams in the desert, anyone?!], training each other in emergency medicine because ambulance response time in poor neighborhoods is too slow, raising money to pay for abortions for those who can't afford them, or coordinating letter-writing to prisoners."<sup>6</sup> Mutual aid is one way to practice disruptive joy - new life bursting forth where we least expect it - alongside those who are most impacted when our current systems target them and fail to care for them. The relationships we build as we take care of each other in these spaces give us a way to tangibly practice the kind of world of abundant joy Isaiah reminds us of, the kind of world Janauda Petrus helps us taste, smell, and hear, the kind of world all of us were made for.
- Start by getting a copy of Dean Spade's book *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*<sup>7</sup> from your local independent bookstore, and read it with a few friends you organize with!

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<sup>6</sup> Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*, pg. 7

<sup>7</sup> Website for Dean Spade's book:

<http://www.deanspade.net/mutual-aid-building-solidarity-during-this-crisis-and-the-next/>

- Looking for a mutual aid project near you? Check out [mutualaidhub.org](https://www.mutualaidhub.org/)<sup>8</sup>, a website maintained by Ground Game Los Angeles that hosts an interactive map with mutual aid projects all over the country. Find one near you and see how you can get involved!

[Outro:]

- Thanks as always for joining us. We'd love to hear from you all, and especially folks of color and non-Christian folks, by commenting on our Soundcloud or Twitter or Facebook pages, or filling out the survey on our podcast page at [surj dot org](https://surj.org). Give us a "like" or rate us on iTunes, Spotify, or wherever you check out our podcast.
- You can find out more about SURJ at [surj dot org](https://surj.org), where you can sign up for SURJ-Faith updates and find transcripts for every episode, which include references, resources, and action links. Next week we'll have a resistance Word from the always brilliant Nicola Torbett. And finally, a huge thanks as always to our sound editor, Claire Hitchens! We appreciate you so much!

[Words of blessing/encouragement:]

- Again, my name is Liz Kearny, and it's been a privilege to share a resistance word from Isaiah with you this week. To close, I'd invite you to soak in the words of a beautiful little disruptive joy song from singer/songwriter Abigail Bengson, which you can hear her sing to you in the Instagram link I'll share in the show notes. Here it goes...
- Despair is a tool of empire. If they exhaust us, they can keep us down. If you feel hopeless, that's on purpose. Oh honey, look around at all of the love that's been poured into you to get you this far. Oh, the work of your ancestors and the love of every holy star. Despair is a tool of empire. If they exhaust us, they can keep us down. If you feel hopeless, that's on purpose. So get mad, get up, get to work, get to rest, do your best, don't let them keep you down."<sup>9</sup>

<<Verse 3 of "Building Up A New World, Verse 1 repeated.>>  
 <<"Rise, Shine, Give God glory, Children of the Light"  
 We are building up a new world, builders must be strong.>>

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RESOURCES:

Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)*,  
<http://www.deanspade.net/mutual-aid-building-solidarity-during-this-crisis-and-the-next/>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.mutualaidhub.org/>

<sup>9</sup> Abigail Bengson, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckthre0DCL7/?hl=en>



Mutual Aid Hub - <https://www.mutualaidhub.org/>

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#### REFERENCES:

Amy Kenny, *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability in the Church*, "Disability Blessings," pgs. 76-77

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Maya Edmonds and Freya Hauer, "South Mpls. poet stirs the imagination with poem about police reform - Junauda Petrus asks: What if we 'give the Police Department to the grandmothers?'" , December 28, 2020, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2020/12/28/south-mpls-poet-stirs-the-imagination-with-poem-about-police-reform>

*Despair is a tool of empire*, Abigail Bengson, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckthre0DCL7/?hl=en>

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