

**To Restore the Ancient Ruins**  
**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; I Thessalonians 5:16-24; Psalm 126**  
**Advent 3**

**Psalm 126**

<sup>1</sup>When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

<sup>2</sup>Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,

“The LORD has done great things for them.”

<sup>3</sup>The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced.

<sup>4</sup>Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb.

<sup>5</sup>May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

<sup>6</sup>Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,  
shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

<sup>1</sup>The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup>to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

<sup>4</sup>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...

<sup>8</sup>For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. <sup>9</sup>Their descendants shall be known among the

nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

<sup>10</sup>I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being 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 with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

<sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

### **I Thessalonians 5:16-24**

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

### The Sermon

Stretching up toward the heavens but no longer able to reach each other, the two remaining sides of an ancient arch are the identifying image of the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey in Somerset, England.

Going back at least to the year 601, and lasting almost a millennium, the Abbey at its peak included a nave that was 220 feet long and 45 feet wide, with majestic additions and a soaring roof and all of the intrigues of those great, ancient buildings wherein each generation over centuries left its architectural mark.

Today, those abbey walls stand alone, rising up in the middle of an open field. You have to know what used to be there in order to imagine the feet and knees of worshippers touching a floor in a covered sanctuary, where now there is only grass under an open sky.

In its time, the abbey at Glastonbury was arguably one of the two greatest structures in England. Now only the remnants of ruins are there to testify to what once was.

That's not automatically a terrible thing; time goes on.

In its millennium, Glastonbury Abbey saw, in the lives of its builders, patrons, stewards, and worshipers, faith and awe, triumphs and travesties, humanity and inhumanity.

It gave witness to the social, political and economic aspirations of people in their nobility and their hubris.

It was a living testament to both the strongest and the weakest expressions of faithfulness, spirituality and holy mystery in the lives of those who came to it, or could see it from a distance or only hear the bells ring out over the countryside at its times of daily prayer.

And now, its ruins testify to what was, in terms of the lived faith of those generations who knew it.

And maybe they testify to what still is and ever shall be, in terms of the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer whose truth and beauty, whose love, and whose creation are the only things vaster and more breathtaking than the greatest abbeys ever constructed.

What remnants do you imagine will witness to your time here?

Most people do not have monuments left to them, and even those that exist turn out to be far from permanent—as we have seen, especially in a season of unrest and outpourings of rage and frustration.

For good or ill, monuments are symbolic of something larger when they are erected; and their eventual removal, destruction or decay is similarly symbolic and indicative. For the generations in between, many of them are appreciated more by traveling birds than by historians or pilgrims.

But for those of us who don't have to worry about what's going to become of the gigantic stone and marble monuments in our memory...

what markers would you hope may remain into the future—indicators that you were here, that God brought you into being and nurtured you through a lifetime, and that you stood for something?

It's kind of a question about the future, but it's more specifically about our past, and the present.

As you make your way through this Advent, preparing for the coming of Christ,

What will he find when he arrives on your doorstep?

What will he see when you follow the testimony of the angels and come to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to you?

What will he receive from you when you open your treasure chest and offer him the gifts you've brought?

The good news is that he comes to us not because we and our gifts are perfect, but because, in our bumbling and fumbling and boneheaded apathies and damnable cruelties, when “the best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity,”<sup>i</sup>

we are still, all of us—each of us—God’s beloved children.

He comes to us because, on our own, we are already in ruins.

He comes to us specifically *because* we are in need of restoration.

The time is not too early, nor are we too inadequate, to deliver the news that we incomplete people have been entrusted to share and to preserve for all those who will come after: to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, to comfort, and provide for, all who mourn.

*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.

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.

Those who go out weeping  
shall come home with shouts of joy.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

And may the God of peace, personally, sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, this Christmas day—this Christmas *season*—and always.

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December 13, 2020

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<sup>i</sup> W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” (1919)