

Sermon Draft for July 6, 2025

Text: Isaiah 66:10–14

Sermon: “Jerusalem”

In chapter 65, Isaiah wrote of the new heavens and new earth, and within that new earth, a restored Jerusalem. This Jerusalem is a city of joy and prosperity, free from strife, calamity, and injustice. In 65:18, “Jerusalem” is parallel to “her people,” and in 65:19, “Jerusalem” is parallel to “my people.” It is not the fate of the buildings with which God is concerned. God is speaking of the city of Jerusalem to refer to the people that he loves, and the restoration of Jerusalem within the new creation is, first and foremost, a restoration of the people of God to a state of righteousness and joy through a restored relationship with God.

When Isaiah returns to the topic of Jerusalem in chapter 66, the new heavens and new earth are still in view. Yet before that final restoration of all things, there must be a time of now and not yet.

Jerusalem, the people of God, will indeed be a source of comfort, delight, and peace, giving God's people a reason to rejoice and a foretaste of the new Jerusalem. At the same time, the people of God will need a source of comfort, delight, and peace; it is a foretaste, but only a foretaste, as they live within a broken world.

“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her” (v 10).

Rejoice with Jerusalem!

If we were to go to Jerusalem today, we would find a city of ruins. There is, of course, a modern city supporting a large population, but beneath that city, and in some cases, carefully excavated to allow access for tourists and archaeologists, is layer after layer of ruins. The two-thousand-year-old steps on which Jesus sat and taught his disciples? You can walk them. The tunnel that Hezekiah cut beneath his city to reroute water seven hundred years earlier. Still there. Still accessible. The magnificent stones, some the size of school buses, that created a giant platform for God's temple. You can touch them.

Noticeably absent, however, is any trace of the temple itself. That building, which the God of the heavens called his own dwelling place, is utterly gone, completely destroyed. King Solomon built the original temple. God inhabited it, claiming it as his own with a cloud so thick and dense and real that no priest could enter. Isaiah, as he wrote, had that temple in his mind's eye. That temple was the center of Isaiah's universe. God was present with his people. God was there. But today the temple is not there. Not one stone was left on another. There aren't even ruins left to visit.

And even though that temple was the center of Isaiah's world, he knows its days are numbered. Already in chapter 64 Isaiah predicts a day when Jerusalem will be a desolation and the temple no more than ruins (64:10–11). He knows that those who love Jerusalem will one day mourn for what has been lost.

Jesus said it most clearly, gazing wistfully at the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it: ***“Behold, your house is forsaken”*** (Luke 13:35).

Jerusalem, in the day of Jesus, still had the temple but rejected the God to whom that house belonged. And so it would not be long before the temple was destroyed with such thoroughness that not even the ruins remained. God was there. But not anymore.

So, no wonder Isaiah speaks a message to those who mourn over Jerusalem. But as we read the words of our text, Isaiah's message is about much more than buildings and streets, stones and mortar.

Jerusalem, for Isaiah, is first and foremost people, God's people. The greatest sorrow for Jerusalem is not what happened to its temple but what happened to its people. The temple was the place of God's presence, and if the presence of God has left his people, then what else is there to do but mourn?

And yet, Isaiah, with prophetic vision, calls us instead to joy. God gives him the ability to see with eyes of faith, to see beyond the walls that were torn down and the stones that were scattered. What Isaiah sees is not a city of ruins. He sees a city of people, God's people.

Most importantly, he sees God dwelling among and within his people. Isaiah sees the church.

When Isaiah speaks of Jerusalem, he is not describing a city made of buildings and bound to a particular geographic location. Isaiah is describing the city where God dwells, the people in whom God dwells. With eyes of faith, Isaiah sees God pouring out his Spirit on all nations, sweeping the Gentiles up into the flooding stream of his grace, and bringing them into his own people. Isaiah glimpses a new Jerusalem, a Jerusalem whose inhabitants are spread all around the globe, and who do not have a temple; they are the temple of God's Spirit.

Isaiah sees the church. Isaiah sees God dwelling, once again, with and within his people, and it is a reason to rejoice. In just that first verse of our text, Isaiah uses three different words, a total of four times, for "joy." Isaiah sees the church, and it is reason to rejoice.

Is that what you see? What do you see when you see God's church?

It is tempting, at first, to picture buildings. Maybe we see empty buildings. Every city in this country has a skyline pierced by steeples that are busy keeping vigil over empty pews or that grace churches repurposed as coffee shops and trendy event venues.

But the church is not buildings. It is not programs and ministries. The church is people. It is God's people gathered around his Word and receiving his sacraments.

And so, we turn our eyes to the people. And if we look only with human eyes, the view is not much improved. The pews are populated with sinners, and that sin is not just a theological concept; it is a brutal fact of life. It is a tongue that does damage, a hand that reaches for a bottle, a temper that flares, eyes that wander, feet that pursue selfish gain, a neck outstretched in vain conceit. It leaves hurt and harm and doubt and despair in its wake.

We turn our eyes from the pews to the pulpit and find the place is still occupied by a sinner, weak and heavy laden.

The image of God is obscured. Human eyes see little more than the ruins of God's temple.

But Isaiah sees by faith: ***“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her”*** (v 10). “Rejoice!” says Isaiah, because Isaiah sees the presence of God.

Much of Isaiah's language strikes our ears as strange. He speaks of Jerusalem as a nursing mother, and then the prophet invites God's people, invites us, to nurse and be satisfied, to drink deeply and delight, to find comfort like a baby cradled in her mother's arms.

The language strikes our ears as strange, but it's not. What Isaiah sees with eyes of faith is the presence of God, the presence of the God who satisfies, who comforts, who delights. And we need him. So, lest we miss the point, in verse 13 Isaiah describes us with the Hebrew word not for a child but for a man. ***“As one [as a “man”] whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.”*** This is a need that we do not outgrow.

We need God. And Isaiah knows exactly where we will find him. It won't be in a temple made with stones, erected on a platform amid the ruins of Jerusalem. It won't be under a steeple in a building that's been converted to a coffee shop. Golfers won't find him on the golf course, and hunters won't find him in the woods.

God is here. He is here where people whose tongues have done damage use those same tongues to confess their sins, and whose ears drink in God's forgiveness. He is here, where the hand that reached for a bottle now reaches for the single sip of wine that satisfies, that works forgiveness of sins. Isaiah sees, and what he sees by faith gives him reason for rejoicing.

What do you see?

- Do you see a wafer of bread or the body of Christ?
- Do you see a liturgical routine drawn from a dusty book, or do you see vibrant conversation with God playing out in ageless words?

- Do you see a pastor reciting the prayers or a community of believers interceding with the Lord who is present and listening?
- Do you see a place? A building? Or do you see the people, like Isaiah did, the living, breathing temple of God's Spirit through whom God is at work day after day and week after week?
- Do you see white hair and wrinkled skin or a fountain of the wisdom of the Scriptures lived out through experience?
- Do you see an obligation you perform for God for an hour each week, or do you see God himself present in your midst, pouring out the gifts that make life abundant and eternal?

Do you see Jesus?

Jesus is here. ***“Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,”*** he promised (Matthew 18:20). Jesus is here in the water and the Word that set you apart as God's own beloved child at the font. Jesus is here, speaking to you in Scripture readings and sermons, teaching you through hymns and liturgy.

Jesus is here, listening to your prayers.

Jesus is here, surrounding each of us with a community of believers, people to whom he has given gifts of wisdom and experience and love and grace to share with you. Jesus is here, giving us gifts of wisdom and experience and love and grace to share with others. Jesus is here, his body, his blood, the forgiveness of our sins, the gift of life everlasting. Jesus is here.

And where Jesus is, there is life. No wonder that when Isaiah sees the Jerusalem of the future, it is not lifeless stones and ancient ruins. He sees a mother sustaining life in her child. And it happens in this community day after day, week after week, year after year. The nursing child needs one food and one food only. And there is only one Savior, one Lord, to whom we can go who has the words of eternal life. He sustains us and all of God's children, year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation, century after century. For two thousand years, the people of God have been sustained for eternal life by meeting Jesus here to find strength in his body and his blood and to find life in his Word.

Isaiah invites us to drink deeply and delight. The greatest joys in life are found not at parties and parades but in the wonder of grace. The tears of joy at sin that has been forgiven. The heart that overflows when the prodigal comes home. The inexpressible joy when the Gospel is believed and someone we love crosses from death to life. Drink deeply of grace! Drink it deeply for yourself. Exult in God's grace for others.

“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her, all you who love her; rejoice with her in joy, all you who mourn over her.”

Jerusalem is no city of ruins. Jerusalem, the Church of Jesus, is alive and well and bringing life to the world.

God is there. God is here. Amen.