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Joy and Gladness

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Romans 12:1-8; Isaiah 51:1-6

Sitting across the pew from Rev. Lai at the Keystone Seattle Taiwanese Church, she began to tell me the heartbreaking story of Dr. Chang Tzi-Liang and his two sons on the night of February 28, 1947. That day and the three following weeks will later come to be infamously known as the 228 Massacre.

Depending on who you ask, the description of that event differs. For Taiwanese and the indigenous people, they called it massacre because Chinese soldier from the mainland together with soldier stationed in Taiwan after the end of WWII when Taiwan was given to China from Japan's fifty-year occupation, committed indiscriminate arrests, public killings, and torture. Others, as the government papers recorded, called it an incident. A New York Times article recounted foreigners observing Chinese

solider and police slaughtering demonstrators without provocation and put the number of people killed at 10,000, but the actual number was as high as 18,000 to 20,000.

After being tortured for hours and later killed, Dr. Chang's mother was given the permission by the solider to, not collect the bodies, but gather the body parts of her son and two grandsons. Placed the mutilated bodies on an ox drawn cart, she brought them home for cleaning, sewed the bodies' parts back together, and prepared them for burial. She then sent her only surviving son to Brazil and ordered him to never return and never let anyone know he was Taiwanese. He lived with the memory of trauma and terror of that day, instructed his family to completely forget their Taiwanese identity, language, culture, and history. For him, he lived in exile and became someone else other than being Taiwanese.

Our scripture today comes first from Isaiah. Hebrew scholars have long noticed the distinct theological themes of the book and commonly divide the entire book of sixty-six chapters into three parts. The three parts are categorized as pre-exile, exile, and post-exile period. Chapters 40-55 are believed to be the work of a prophet who lived with the Hebrew exiles during the Babylonian

captivity. Because of his name is unknown to us, scholars have designated him as Deutero-Isaiah, or second Isaiah, or modernized as Isaiah 2.0.

This prophet faced the tall task of giving hope and encouragement to the exiles who were teetering on the edge of despair. They felt forsaken and forgotten by God when their nation and temple were destroyed, and they were taken into enslavement. To the disheartened people, the prophet calls out, "Here is your God!" God has not forsaken the exiled people. God was not defeated by the Babylonians. God is supreme and is in control of all things and history.

In our chapter today, the prophet once again offers words of comfort, hope, and a vision of abundance. In the heart of captivity and depression, Isaiah seeks to expand their imagination to include the vision that God's people can participate in the deliverance God promises. Imagine moving from the place of desolation and terror to hope and joy, from desert to garden, from captivity to freedom.

Yes, the exiled people lost everything they have known, but they have not lost God. The prophet tells the exiles in the desert places of their lives an absurd vision of strength

and abundance. It was jarring or even insensitive to speak of such ridiculous things into lives of devastated and displaced people. The prophet calls out to them to remember. Remember to pursue righteousness, seek God, and look to the rock from which they were hewn and to the quarry from which they were dug. Look to the strength of their faith as firm and lasting as the mountain. God has not abandoned them. The prophet insists that deliverance resides in this very place of their exile, and a transformation so concrete that people can sing for joy and gladness, and thanksgiving and songs. Look for God's justice as light to the people. God's salvation and deliverance will never end.

Tomorrow will mark the 60th anniversary of March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. History has documented how throngs of people, estimated at 250,000, gathered near the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to hear what would become Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech. Several major news outlets have interviewed many who attended the march and contrast the significance of that day and moment to now. To say it was a transformative day would be an understatement. Some called it the vision of what we ought to be as a nation when people of all backgrounds

and races gathered for a common vision of equality and justice. It renewed those who gathered and those who heard the speech to usher in changes. All of them shared the progress that has been made and also noted the enormous journey to Dr. King's vision that is still ahead.

Clarence Jones, Dr. King's personal attorney, adviser, and speechwriter was 32 at the time when he helped Dr. King draft the speech. He recounted the moment when he knew history was about to take place. He was standing behind Dr. King during the speech. He noticed the way a Black Baptist pastor is about to proclaim the word of God and power of the Spirit moving over the crowd. He compared it to going to church. Looking back now, Jones said,

"I feel that I am the beneficiary of some of the best medicine in the world. That's the reason - 93 - going to be 93. But I have an obligation. As long as I have any breath in my body, I have an obligation to carry on the work of Fannie Lou Hamer, Harry Belafonte, all of those people like Fred Shuttlesworth and the legacy of those four beautiful girls who were murdered on September 15. And I'm going to do that until the day I die."

Paul in Romans urges us to be living sacrifices by not conforming to world where injustices distort God's vision. Instead, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds with humility, sober judgement, and common good for all people. Those who marched that day and afterward embraced and embodied this vision of hope and being a living sacrifice to bring joy and gladness and sing songs of thanksgiving while they labor on.

A few days ago, I received a call from Tim. He has been cleaning up his office with the anticipation of his retirement and final months with us here at Westminster. Each of us Associate Pastors have been recipients of Tim's generosity as we received documents, books, mugs, and other delightful items from his office. I came back to my office after the sabbatical, and pleasantly found a small pile of books. When he called the other days, Tim wanted to pass on some important documents he has gathered throughout his years.

Part of our role as your pastors is to be a listener to your stories. Aside from the confidential information you entrust us with, we receive countless tales, dreams, hopes, and stories of your lives. It is a privilege all of us take with a great deal of seriousness and honor. Tim has gathered

stories from the members who have spoken with him. Now that his time is coming to an end with us, the stories, your stories, continue, and now we, the Associate Pastors, have the joy of receiving those stories.

In a similar way, I too also have a collection of your stories. In my case, they are stories first collected by previous pastors such as our Emeritus Associate Pastor Kathy Michael. As we the current Associate Pastors serve this community, the collection has grown. With Tim's addition, I will need bigger filing cabinets.

This reminds me to talk with Meghan and PJ about my requisition request.

The stories in written form will come alive when they are spoken at the time of remembering and celebrating the person. All the stories are full of joy and gladness, and thanksgiving and songs. The words will have a mighty voice to inspire and transform the minds and hearts of the listeners.

For your stories are the living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Being a living sacrifice means not just a change of mental concepts, but a direct translation into

actions. They are stories full of not conforming and countercultural to this world, and stories of transformation by renewal and growth.

Time of remembrance are full of loss and sadness, but it is also full of joy. When they are spoken, they take on the superpower to transform minds and hearts. Just as Apostle Paul speaking boldly to death, “where O death is your sting?” Death does not have the final word, but life eternally with God has the final word. Death does not define us, but life lived abundantly, faithfully, and lovingly define the person. Death has no power, but the living power of God has the ultimately power.

Nearly seventy years have passed since the massacre. Rev. Lai, together with four other clergy women of Taiwan Presbyterian Church, sat together with the granddaughter of Dr. Chang. Her father, the surviving son, taught the family to only speak English and Portuguese, because any association with Taiwanese language, culture, history, and memory was simply too painful and traumatic. They suffered in silence in their exile. In the last thirty years, Taiwan experienced a rapid rise in democracy by the lifting of martial law and expansion from a single party rule to multi-party government. President Lee, first

Taiwanese born president other than the Chiang family dictatorship formally recognized the 228 massacre and a memorial was erected nearly the presidential palace in Taipei. Taiwanese exiled from all over the world began to return. They return from their exile to find a new county but still entrenched in political struggle to remember the past and identity.

With every story of trauma shared quietly, with every tear shed for lost time and loved one, with every pain manifested from sorrow and grief, the light of joy and gladness begin to dawn. The five clergy women provided support, friendship, and connection with the Chang family and their stories have emerged and awaken the national consciousness.

A few weeks ago, Meghan reminded us to create a joy radar so we can recognize, store, and celebrate joy. As we walk forward into the upcoming transition of our senior pastor, and as we love and support each other, we are reminded today to be a living sacrifice to overcome inequality and in justice with deep well of joy and gladness. Together we can face the hour of this day with courage, determination, and strength. May God bless our endeavor and journey ahead. Amen.