

# Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections  
based on this week's lectionary readings

December 14, 2014  
Advent 3B

## The readings this week:

- Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 ◦ Psalm 126
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 ◦ John 1:6-8, 19-28

[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

## Joy?

I'm sitting in my office on one of the sunniest mornings we've had in weeks, but if I were to walk out the door without a jacket, I'd be freezing because it's also one of the coldest mornings so far this winter.

This is a season of contrasts: in the weather; in the hectic busyness versus the desire to "cocoon" at home; in people's emotional states.

December is "supposed" to be a time of happiness in all the frenetic activity, and that cultural expectation merely highlights the fact that, for many, this is not an easy time. Some are still suffering from the economic downturn even as others have found jobs. Those who are unsteady on their feet worry about slippery sidewalks while children pray for snow days. Not every family dynamic is what we'd like it to be. Grief and loss and winter depression are mocked by happy carols piped into shopping malls.

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. 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." The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves. [from Psalm 126]*

As I looked at the lectionary readings for this week, I almost didn't choose the Psalm for my reflection. In its six short verses the writer uses the phrase "shouts of joy" three times. That seems a little too cheerful for our age. On the news this morning there were a few uplifting stories, but most of it was about abuse, scandal, economic distress and crime. "Shouts of joy" don't seem quite appropriate.

It might have seemed that way to the psalmist's early readers, too. Crisis after crisis plagued the people of that age (and every age before and since), too. Whether the predicament was the threat of war, drought and famine, poverty, or the same types of personal suffering we all experience, many of those readers would have related more to the "tears" and "weeping" parts of this psalm. And that is exactly the point.

For people who live in the desert, the dream of the restoration of watercourses (the streambeds that filled with water after infrequent rains) was just the right metaphor.

Yes, the drought may be long, but someday the rain will return to your parched souls, so that life may once again bloom in the deserts of your hurt places.

This is the very essence of hope. That one day the world will live in peace; that everyone will have decent work and enough to eat, sufficient clothing and shelter.

That even on a cold day in winter, joyful laughter may roll off the tongue.

May the joy of Advent make its way into your heart.

© Melissa Bane Sevier, 2011



# Reflecting on the Word



## 1st Reading: [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)

What does “liberty,” understood in a spiritual sense, mean to you? Luther once said that when he was to face an especially challenging day, he would arise an hour or two earlier to provide more time for prayer. What do you think of that practice? What do you identify as the most significant “darkness” in your community? How can you and your congregation bring “light” into that “darkness”? How does the prophet know he is called and has the Spirit, in verse 1a? Why is the Spirit important? What is the “good news” he is to deliver? What is his mission, in 1b-3a? List the verbs in these verses. What do the verbs suggest to you? Then list the nouns, what the verbs deliver. What does this list of words suggest to you? What sentence or phrase in these verses do you think best sums up the whole set of verses? What will be the outcome of the good things God will do? [Light on the Lessons](#)

Thank You for joy and delight, for wonder and awe, for moments of gladness and celebration. Grant me the ability to breathe gentleness into my hours and seasons, so that I live awake to beauty, to holiness, to the radiance that surrounds us. Grant me the wisdom to arrive each day with passion and humor, with song and dance, with smiling eyes, in service to myself, in service to others, in service to Your Holy Name.

© 2013 Alden Solovy and [www.tobendlight.com](http://www.tobendlight.com)



## Psalm Reading: [Psalm 126](#)

How would you define joy? What do you do when you are filled with joy? This is a song of celebration by the exiles who returned to Zion. What emotions do you see expressed throughout this psalm? What imagery is used in verses 1-2 to describe the joy the writers feel? How do verses 4-6 reflect a balance between cause and effect? How are sadness and joy intertwined? The Israelites give God the credit for the “great things” that have happened. How do you do with giving God the credit? When do you feel inhibited about freely expressing your joy? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

## 3rd Reading: [1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#)

In verses 16-18, what are the three verbs? How are they described in verse 18b? What words and phrases follow the verbs? Are these words and phrases intended to be literal, or have they a literary or rhetorical function? What are the “do nots” in verses 19-20 and how are they related? (Clue: Check 1 Corinthians 14:37-40, where Paul deals with this issue in a different way.) How is “faithful” explained in verse 24? What five admonitions does Paul give related to the Spirit and prophecies? For what two things does Paul pray in behalf of the Thessalonians? What assurance is there that God will do this? [Light on the Lessons](#) and [Executable Outlines](#)

## 4th Reading: [John 1:6-18, 19-28](#)

Why do you think the First Lesson and this Gospel were paired? What is the role of the Baptist vis-à-vis Jesus? What were his message and the purpose of his baptism? How did it differ from baptism in Jesus, according to Acts 19:1-7? What verse in our Gospel makes that same point? Replace the name “John” in verses 6-8 with your name and change the appropriate pronouns. Now read the altered verses aloud. Do they make sense? What are they saying to you? How do you fulfill these verses in your life? [Light on the Lessons](#)

### [This Fleeting Season....](#)

Advent is the time to prepare...each day, ponder a new question...and use the Advent Season to count your blessings one by one, many by many.

Sunday, December 7 *What happened in July 2014? This can be a blessing or obstacle: some significant event, place, person, action that you want to remember...*

Monday, December 8 *What happened in August 2014?*

Tuesday, December 9 *What happened in September 2014?*

Wednesday, December 10 *What happened in October 2014?*

Thursday, December 11 *What happened in November 2014?*

Friday, December 12 *Who were your teachers, coaches, bosses, preachers....people who were your leaders this year?*

Saturday, December 13 *Who are your new friends this year?*