

I live in a fabulous old house not far from church. Of course, it's only fabulous because the former owners did a lot of work restoring it. They ripped out the ugly dated carpet, refinished the wood floors, rebuilt the kitchen, painted the woodwork. It looks beautiful because they took care to preserve the home's original charm and character. But that's not always easy, or cheap. Old homes can be kind of quirky. A few weeks ago one of my doors got stuck. I had to take the molding off the door frame and drill a hole in one of the studs to get it open. It turned out the interior locking mechanism in the door had broken. The man at the hardware store said I could replace it with a shiny new one ... or special order one with a worn patina that matched the rest of the house. One solution cost about \$8 and would take about 2 minutes. The other cost about \$70 and would take about 2 weeks. Want to guess which one I chose? It's a small thing, but it reminds me that restoration is not always easy.

God's people in Isaiah's day needed to be restored, albeit in a different way. They had been living in exile in Babylon for close to 50 years. You can imagine how hard it was for them to hang on to their customs, their identity. It was a little like Norwegian or Swedish or German immigrants trying to recreate the life they'd known in the old country. Unlike immigrants to America, though, many of the Israelites had no plans to stay in Babylon. They wanted to return to the promised land of their ancestors. But that land was far, far away, literally and figuratively.

It is to these people that Isaiah begins to paint a picture of restoration. He tells of a place where the people belong, a place where new life grows in abundance and they can put down deep roots. His description is poetic, almost beyond words: *The desert*

*will rejoice and blossom. Waters shall break forth in the wilderness. A holy highway will be there, and no one who travels on it shall go astray.* Isaiah promises that God will bring back what had been lost. Where once there was no future, now there is a future. Where once there was sorrow, now there is joy. Whatever was old and broken-down has been refurbished and made new ... even better than new. The people will be reunited and the nation rebuilt and peace will reign and God will be with them. It sounds wonderful ... almost too good to be true.

When I think about the transformation of my house I firmly believe the former owners have a gift, the ability to see past what's right in front of them and imagine what could be. Restoration is hard work. Sometimes we need a little encouragement to get started, or to stick with it. Isaiah had that gift too. He wants the people to believe that there are better things ahead. But they have to trust the God will be leading them, and they have to commit to the hard work it will take to make it so.

We all need restoration in some way or another. My aunt had major surgery here at the clinic this week. Restoration for her is regaining her strength so she can get back to everyday life. A friend who left an abusive marriage struggles with low self-esteem. Restoration for her means believing that she deserves peace and love and good things in her life. A man I know puts in exhausting hours at a dead-end job he can't afford to leave. Restoration for him might be helping someone in need so he can feel like he's making a difference. Maybe you've got an overstuffed schedule filled with activities that run you ragged, or the emotional pain of a strained relationship. Do you believe that such restoration is possible for you? We want to believe God can make things new, but when life has this way of convincing us otherwise, it seems almost too good to be true.

At our staff meeting Tuesday, Janette Reeves shared one place where she's seen restoration happen. Four years ago, Janette's mom Caryl was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of ovarian cancer. The prognosis wasn't good. Caryl spent close to four months in the hospital. Things looked so bad that a couple of her doctors told her she should just give up and go home. Caryl needed someone with Isaiah's gift of imagination. And then she met a Mayo doc who told her if she was willing to keep on fighting he'd fight with her every step of the way. It's the word she'd longed to hear. So that's what they did. It wasn't easy. It took everything she had to push through the pain and discouragement. But a miracle of medicine and healing happened in Caryl., She was restored. Shortly after Thanksgiving this year Caryl wrote that doctor a letter. "Because of your willingness to give me a chance I have spent three Christmases and four Easters with my family," she wrote. "I have knit prayer shawls and made casseroles for shut-ins and been given opportunities to comfort and encourage people who were dealing with cancer." She went on: "I try to make a difference for someone else every day, because I have had a difference made for me." Caryl didn't just have her health restored. She had her sense of purpose and trust in God restored too. And if it can happen for Caryl, couldn't it happen for you too?

Please hear me: restoration doesn't mean things will turn out exactly the way we want them to. Sometimes a marriage is too broken to fix. Sometimes nations can't stop fighting. Sometimes cancer wins. But that doesn't mean God is absent. It doesn't mean it's not worth the effort of trying. Because sometimes it's the very process of seeking God and asking that we be made whole that renewal starts to happen.

I've felt that most keenly lately at our Wednesday night Advent worship services. It's been a beautiful, powerful experience. The sanctuary is rearranged to create a more intimate circle of chairs, with the manger in the center. The lights are low; the room is filled with glowing blue votives; the music is soft and lovely. For me it truly feels like God drawing us close, filling the room with peace and hope. But the most meaningful time comes when we light candles. One, two, three at a time they come—grandparents and grandchildren, confirmation students and mentors, big sisters helping little brothers. They come to kneel or stand in front of those candleboxes, hands clasped, sending up to God a silent personal prayer. I don't know what they're praying for, but I find myself praying for them. And whether they're asking that their hearts be made new or that they feel the Spirit's presence or that the rocky places of their lives be smoothed out, their prayers are all rising to God together. And that makes God feel a little closer.

Isn't that what Isaiah is saying? God's people may not need the same thing, but they are searching for the same God, singing the same songs, telling the same stories of God's great love. As we make the faithful journey God changes us. Restoration happens every time we step up to the communion table together, every time we surround a family to celebrate baptism together, every time we reach out to adopt families in need and serve meals to the hungry together. Those things become our glimmer of hope that God is still here and God will make all things new.

I don't know what kind of restoration you need in your life. But whether it be old broken-down homes or broken-down families or broken-down bodies, Isaiah's words are for you: *Be strong. Do not fear. Here is your God. He will come and save you.* It's Advent. The Christ child is coming. Hope and restoration is on the way. Amen.