

ONE: MISSION – ISAIAH 61:1-7

Saturday Morning Worship, September 3
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Conference Video: <http://worldmethodistconference.com/wp-content/uploads/wmc2016-videos/Wmc16-satam-coxdarling-v2-1.m4v>

Grace and peace be with you in the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ. My name is Joanne Cox Darling and it is my privilege and honor to share this message with you. And to share this stage with such a phenomenal band and tech team. Thank you guys so much!

Yesterday I went up to the roof to pray. It sounds terribly holy, but I must say I did more swimming than I did praying. And I realized that I was really missing home. I was missing my gorgeous husband and my delightful 10-month old daughter. Cute! I was missing all the adventures they were having and all the dribble and nappy changes. I began to miss home and I was really delighted that I did have the swimming pool to hide my salt water tears.

The passage of scripture that we are looking at today is a passage of scripture of missing home. It is written to a group of people who have cypress trees and not swimming pools to hide their tears. They don't have a return ticket or a Whatsapp account. They are deeply missing home.

And so we turn our attention to Isaiah, chapter 61.

*"The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me
Because the Lord has anointed
To proclaim good news to the poor
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted
To proclaim freedom from darkness for the prisoners
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
To comfort all who mourn
And to provide for those who grieve
Instead of your shame
You will receive a double portion...and everlasting joy will be yours."*

In the midst of the pain of being exiled, and in need of hope in a desperate situation, Isaiah speaks words of comfort to a broken people. Words which prime them once again to participate in the coming Kingdom of God. To worship God together in unity. It inspires the Hebrew people to risk rebuilding their communal identity together in a new cultural situation.

It is these same words which Jesus chooses to launch his own mission. The template for Christian mission and wholehearted godly living throughout history.

This passage from Isaiah reminds us that it is often in the margins of society that we are able to discover more of the nature of God and to participate in his coming Kingdom.

Isaiah is written to a marginalised, homeless people, struggling to find their identity in a world context where they were no longer the biggest global superpower.

The Hebrew people have been shamed for what they once took for granted. They've lost their empire, and they are living in fear about what this new migration means to their identity, their families, and their wider society.

The institutions that they saw at the centre of their identity were crumbling. They were grieving for what was once and will never be again. They wanted their country to be great again.

Other religions were gaining ground. Groups of people were persecuted for their beliefs, imprisoned, abused, killed. They needed VISAs to travel. Some of which were never granted. There was a shift in power base away from traditional experience of patriarchal leadership. Women were gaining power.

There is a deeply felt sense of loss and grief at the very heart of personal relationship. Worship became marked by confession and lament. 'How long, o Lord...' They wanted the ancient songs and rituals of the past to provide them with the safe spaces and solace in which to thrive.

Individual identity began to be subsumed by a desire of greater interconnectedness – between races, between humanity, and indeed between the cypress trees of creation. God appeared absent. Spirituality, although formalised, became more attractive than the institutions of the past.

Exile, as Isaiah shows us, is both a tentative and emotive place to be. It's a difficult place to thrive. They were missing home. I guess many of us are making those same parallels today. Those same intense and painful similarities between the Ancient Near Eastern context, the context of exile and our experience of discipleship in a globalized world.

But, as Isaiah also teaches us, exile can be a place of great creativity and surprise. People discover their potential afresh. They discover gifts and skills and relationships. In the midst of their despair and frustration, people are opened to being primed and catalysed for transformation. Full of pain and anguish, exile can be a place of great creativity and chaos. The theologian, Walter Brueggemann describes this place as 'liminality':

He says this, *'liminality is a safe place to host ambiguity, to notice tensions, and live with the freedom to see and test an alternative texting of our reality.'*

A place in which to host with freedom and to see and test an alternative texting of our reality. In other words, another world is possible.

Isaiah encourages his heroes into this vulnerable, fractured, marginalised place. And enables his heroes to recognize that the Spirit is still brooding away. The Spirit of God enables this alternative texting of our reality. We may be missing home, but the Spirit of God is at work; nurturing the Kingdom of God into being out of the embers of our brokenness, shame, persecution, schism. The Spirit is, in Wesley's terms, strangely warming hearts. Many of us will also note that it is warming very strange hearts too. Through the catalysing of the Spirit, and through faithfully following Jesus, people are becoming primed and ready to transform our communities and political systems. This creative, redemptive, chaotic Spirit brings hope and healing.

However terrified, shamed, despairing or guilt ridden the Hebrew people felt; the Ruach – the breath of God – Spirit – transformed, recreated, and redeemed State, society and civilisation.

In turn, we are encouraged too, to take solace. To recognize that the same Ruach – the breath of God – Spirit – transforms, recreates, and redeems our States, society and civilisation.

The Spirit of God is calling her Church into a continued discovery of what this liminal alternative texting means. The Spirit of God moves around us and the people in our care. Providing those places of invitation– those safe or disruptive places to notice the Kingdom of God in our midst and to join in.

The Spirit of God is still revealing herself as creative, redemptive and chaotic. The missional Spirit can and is uniting and reinvigorating a movement which has long forgotten its purpose and discipleship identity.

I'm a visual thinker and I needed an image to help me think about what this might look like in reality. I wanted to find an image which showed the energy the spirit of mission, which encourages us to be Wesleyan catalysts for kingdom-change in our communities.

I found a video that took two, simple mundane objects – a ping pong ball and a mousetrap.
[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7YQI6BCuAE>]

This chain reaction – a reaction of great creativity and exponential energy and uncontained chaos – a reminder for me about what the Mission of God is about.

In these uncertain and austere times, we need a powerful visual reminder that the Spirit of God is active and at work in our world.

That the Spirit is creative, redemptive, and utterly chaotic.

That humanity is primed and ready to respond to the word of God and the wind of the Spirit. A reminder that simple, mundane objects can be a catalyst for change.

The creative, redemptive, chaotic Spirit is breezing and calling individuals and groups to participate in the Kingdom life. To live their lives wholeheartedly – connected, compassionate, creative, courageous.

And what makes this good news?

That it is God's mission, not our mission.

"We love because God first loved us."

It's not us that first had a mission – it is the missionary nature of God – who has a mission, and who graciously invites us to play a prime part.

I wondered how you felt, watching that video. You see, I have two responses to it. On really, really good days I love it. I'm left utterly breath taken by it. I get energized by all the potential and sheer joy that I see. I play with the metaphor in my mind and remember the groups of people I know who have been primed and ready to respond to the ping pong ball of the spirit in their lives.

I think of my friend Lucy who noticed that in her community the traditional family unit no longer existed. Young people were no longer coming to church on a Sunday because they had to go visit Mom or Dad or because they had a sports group to go to.

Lucy, together with a small group of people, decided to be brave and courageous and to open the church on another day of the week. They provided food and craft activities. They developed tools to help families live a Christian life at home. They invited people into this new community family. And began the international movement, Messy Church.

Sometimes, however, I watch this video, and start to feel a little sick. I am scared at the uncontrollable nature of the metaphor – I really would like a little more order and clarity. It leaves me breathless; out of breath and exhausted at the prospect of all the potential, all the planning, the meetings, and organisation required in order to maintain the zeal and the energy of renewal. It all seems so unnecessary and expensive. There are no measures of success and outcome plans. There is no budget control or monitoring of process. There are no policies and procedures or precedent.

I wonder whether this is how John Wesley felt as he wrote to Reverend Perronet in 1748. *"I must premise that I had not the least expectation, at first, of anything like what since followed. They had no previous design at all. Everything just arose."*

Then he goes on to justify how the movement began class meetings, band meetings, accountability clusters, stewards, pastoral visitors, schools, and event hospitals! That somewhat of an exhausting list!

How about you?

Are you breath taken, or left breathless by it?

For some of us in this room, our ministry has been breathtaking. We have seen the movement of God's spirit in ways that we cannot describe. We have seen healing and release and liberation and transformation. We can testify to the mending of broken hearts, our own and others. We have seen the liberation of captives, comfort for the mourning and praises rising from the midst of despair. We have been amazed by God's grace.

We have been inspired by the lives of others around and about us who have in turn catalysed new missions, churches, and communities. We have been awestruck at the creation around us, and been left breath-taken at the glory of God. We have seen and know the joy that comes from following Jesus. And we continue to live passionately and generously, maybe even prodigally.

For some us, the video is a painful reminder of what once was, is not, and may never be again. For some of us we are still reacting and reflecting on the breathless pain of Exile. We miss our heritage home. We see for ourselves all the hard work that we've had to put in just to keep up. And we're exhausted. We do not seem to be good enough, fast enough, clever enough, react quickly enough. There is so much need, so much potential and we just don't know where to start.

We expend ourselves in service of God's missional Spirit and yet there is a desert in our hearts and in our ministry. And quite frankly, a young audacious Brit and a soda stream company are not helpful.

We are trying our best, and yet we are out of breath.

We are tired and beaten down and yet we look outside of our windows and we realize the very same is true at the heart of creation.

The Somali poet, Warsan Shire has written this:

*Later that night
I held an atlas in my lap
Ran my fingers across the whole world
And whispered
Where does it hurt*

*It answered
Everywhere
Everywhere
Everywhere*

In reality, I know both of these experiences. I know that the world hurts everywhere and I know that because I hurt. And God's people hurt. But I feel both breath-taken and breathless. Because I also know that Jesus hurts and still calls us to go into the world and make disciples of all nations.

Down the road and around the corner at the University of Houston, there is a professor called Brene Brown. Her lifetime of research has helped her to discover, how we might live our lives wholeheartedly. She has done this by hearing and collecting the stories, mainly women, from around the world, especially

from the global south. She has heard stories from genocide, to civil war and apartheid. And she has concluded that in order to be wholehearted, we need to be primed and ready to be connected, compassionate, and courageous. For Brown, this is only achieved by sharing our experiences of both breathtaking joy and breathless vulnerability.

She recognises that in the nature of our humanity we are not always primed and ready to live wholeheartedly. We are distracted, distant, or simply too busy.

But in our breathless, out of breath, state of heart and mind, Brown says that: *'We need to stop seeing exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as a mark of our self worth.'*

There is a very real danger, in my ping pong metaphor, that as the Spirit springs to life we want it all. We want to participate over there and over there and over there. We spend our time doing a million honourable things. Keep saying yes. We are burdened by the challenges of multiple congregations, numerous pastoral needs within our own families and beyond. Attendance at committee meetings and we are short staffed. We become breathless at the weight of the local church world on our shoulders, and we fail to live wholeheartedly. Then we switch on our smart phone or open a newspaper and listen to the world news, and become acutely aware of how insignificant we are. We become more and more isolated and indifferent. We become less connected, less compassionate, less courageous. And we become burned up and burned out. Spent rather than primed.

It is then that I re-read these words from Isaiah. All the things that the Spirit of God achieves in a broken, messy, messed up, breathless, exhausted world. I see something breathtaking. I see something that transforms my own ministry and my own family life; something which brings potential to those I share my life with; something which unites people around the world – regardless of race, creed, colour, income, or theology.

'There is neither Jew or gentile, slave nor free neither male nor female, queer or straight, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'

There is something deeply liberating about living wholeheartedly - about being connected, compassionate, and courageous. Around this room, we have the unprecedented potential to be launching Wesleyans and Methodists around the globe to be a people of these deep connections, active compassion, and unimaginable courage. Not because the institution has got it right – but we trust that the spirit will redeem us, will enable us to be creative, and is utterly chaotic. We follow Christ who calls us to unite together in a Gospel news to the poor, to bind up broken hearts, to stand alongside the persecuted, to challenge the powers and dominions in the name of Jesus, to bring liberty to the addicted and the afflicted, to comfort those who mourn and to share hope in the midst of our global shame, guilt, and fear.

The late theologian Angela Shier-Jones notes that the most effective mission often comes from within the place of brokenness, rather than active towards it. She says this:

"[mission] cannot be done to a community by someone who knows what they need, it can only be done with a community by someone who shares their need."

And so I think as my friends who themselves have been unemployed, or who are struggle with attention deficit disorder, and having found their way back into work, support other young people struggling to concentrate and struggling to find their way into interview situations and successful work.

There is the colleague who having battled through their own addiction, now volunteers with an addicts anonymous group.

My friend, and artist, who gave up a formal circuit ministry in order to move into a studio in the arts quarter of town and spent two years painting. His community now calls him 'The Abbot.'

There is the jazz musician who was influenced by the work of John Coltrane, and that he now travels the whole world performing jazz evening prayer.

There is the family almost torn apart by mental illness, now running a drop-in facility for people struggling with similar issues.

There are the young people of Chile so desperate to talk about their faith on the street corners that every summer vacation, they hire a bus and tour their country.

Each one of us has stories to add to this list. People using their God given potential, and their vulnerability. Oftentimes their own brokenness and frailties, to serve the communities of people around and about them. Sharing the good news of Jesus and enabling them to participate in something of this Kingdom life.

In the far deep south of England, one entrepreneur, a guy named Tim, had an idea. He took a disused mining facility and transformed it into a place for environmental and ecological education and research. He named the project: Eden. One of the many breathtaking things about this project is the design of the venue. Each individual pane of glass in the glass house ecosystem is vulnerable and fragile. Each one is weak. The whole structure, is flimsy and flawed. That is until the final piece is put into place. For when that happens, what was a weak structure now stands as one of the strongest human-made structures in the world.

Joining in the mission of God; following the Holy Spirit breeze her way through shanties and Shangri-La hotels; does not mean that we have to be without flaws. Joining in the mission of God and following the spirit as she transforms this world into the Kingdom of God, the coming Eden means that we offer our whole selves, wholeheartedly. Vulnerabilities in tact. It is as we contribute together, so we become strong. And just like the Eden Project, it needs each of us to play our parts. To be connected, compassionate, courageous, united. *'For it is in our weakness that Christ makes us strong.'*

Mundane things, like ping pong balls and mousetraps, and a giant glass house, help us to recapture a glimpse of what the missional kingdom of God might be and mean for our communities. I need to be reminded that mission is not just about congregational growth and institutional change and the bottom line. Mission can be a mundane and ordinary experience. It is about everyone playing their part, reaching their God-given potential, even if it seems utterly insignificant.

Barbara Brown Taylor has written:

"To make bread, or love, to dig in the earth, to feed an animal or cook for a stranger – these activities require no extensive commentary, no lucid theology. All they require is someone willing to bend, reach, chop, stir. Most of these tasks are so full of pleasure that there is no need to complicate things by calling them holy. And yet these are the same activities that change lives, sometimes at once and sometimes more slowly, the way dripping water changes stone. In a world where faith is often construed as a way of thinking, bodily practices remind the willing that faith is a way of God."

The image of the ping pong balls reminds me to follow Jesus, and to live wholeheartedly full of the missional spirit, and I need to be embodying my faith. Mission is not lip service and words. It is the act of washing feet, distributing bread, baking fish and touching the sick; just as Christ did. It is putting away the chairs, washing the dishes, and recycling the trash.

It is in embodying of our Christian discipleship that we create the safe liminal spaces that Bruggemann spoke about. It is in the vulnerability of shared action and living together that we are better able to discover these alternative textings of Kingdom reality. That another world is possible in the midst of the pain and persecution. The Spirit gives us potential to seek the redemption and transformation with all the people God brings us into contact with.

It is then that holy disruption takes place. And as the ping pong ball of the spirit launches itself afresh,

To the poor, the Spirit offers compassion.

To the broken the Spirit brings wholeness.

To the captives and the addicted the Spirit brings freedom.

To those in the darkness – psychological, spiritual or physical – the Spirit brings the light of Christ.

To those in mourning – the spirit comforts.

To those grieving for what once was, is not, and shall never be again – the Spirit brings solace and lament.

To those shamed – the Spirit brings blessing.

To those disgraced – the Spirit brings hope and identity.

To those despairing, the Spirit brings forth songs of joy.

Now these are the things of a missional God. These are the things of following Jesus. I have confidence that the Spirit of God is at work in breathtaking ways. I hear the stories around this room and in our countries and communities. I hear the stories and notice the glimpses of the Kingdom of God in surprising and challenging places. I dare to experience the power of the Spirit at work in my life, and I continue to discover afresh my purpose and calling. I choose to remain primed and ready to fulfill my God-given calling. I celebrate communities and churches who are in the same place. And I choose to mourn with those communities who know that their mission is now completed. I want to seek out more opportunities for people to discover Jesus personally. I want to see the Spirit shake institutions, to challenge injustice, and for the Kingdom of God, God's new Eden, to be realised until I am called home at last.

I believe that God is not finished with us Wesleyans yet. I believe in the God of the One Mission and in the coming of the Kingdom of God. And of the potential here, present in our midst. I believe that we are being called to be primed and ready to respond afresh to the movement of the Spirit which will be utterly chaotic and uncontrollable and that's okay. I believe it is time for a liminal, alternative texting of our reality because we live and know that another world is possible. I believe that we are being reminded of the need to be connected, compassionate and courageous as we follow Christ in our day to day lives and not to get distracted by other stuff.

Am I really ready? Are we really ready?