I’d like to begin today’s message with a story. Attributed to Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher and storyteller and retold by Parker Palmer in his book The Active Life. In condensed version: Once upon a time there was an angel in heaven who became quite distressed in seeing all the pain and suffering that God was allowing to happen on earth below. So he asked the Lord to let him run the earth for a year, and was granted his wish. So the angel eliminated all pain and suffering and showered the people with a rich harvest that fall. There was no room to store all their crops. The angel basked in self-satisfied glory. But late in the year, the angel heard a great clamor of angry voices coming heavenward and went down to investigate. He discovered this strange problem: the people had threshed the grain and ground it into flour. But after baking the bread, when they took it out of the oven it fell apart into hard, inedible pieces. It had a disgusting taste, like clay. The people were cursing God for deceiving them with his false blessings. The angel returned to heaven, fell at God’s feet and cried out, “Lord, help me to understand where my power and judgment were lacking.” God said: “Behold a truth which is known to me from the beginning of time, a truth too deep and dreadful for your delicate, generous hands, my sweet apprentice—it is this, that the earth must be nourished with decay and covered with shadows that its seeds may bring forth—and it is this, that souls must be made fertile with flood and sorrow, that through them the Great Work may be born.” (1)

It’s a good story to keep in mind as we look at today’s theme of “transforming our sorrow.” Like the angel, many of us have good intentions when we reach out to those who are hurting. We want to fix people’s problems, to relieve their suffering, to make them happy again. But in trying to help, we may end up doing more harm than good. Especially, if we try to hurry them out of a process that God wants to use for purposes beyond our finite understanding. I was curious as to what this “Great Work” might be that God mentioned to the angel. Parker Palmer suggests that it is “…the work of developing compassion by suffering the fires of failure.” (2) I think I agree with him. God is more interested in our becoming people of compassion than he is that we be “happy”, at least the way our culture defines happiness. Above all, God want us to become like Jesus. And we know that he wasn’t happy all the time. In fact, according to Isaiah 53, he was known as a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And because of that, Hebrews 4:15 tells us, Jesus can “sympathize with our weaknesses” since he has experienced all the hard knocks of life that come to us as human beings.

What are some of these difficult times of sorrow? They come in many forms. Some of us struggle with Seasonal Affective Disorder, rightly shortened “SAD” – brought on by a lack of sunlight during the long, cloudy days of our northern Ohio winters. Some of us are dealing with unfulfilled dreams, realizing by mid-life that some of the goals we have worked hard for will not happen. Some of us have cried many tears over children who have made bad choices and are now living with the painful consequences. Some of us are trying to cope with new limitations imposed on our bodies by the aging process or by sickness. And one of the deepest sorrows in the human family: the death of a loved one. I had to reflect this week on the sorrow I’ve experienced here at Beech in the last
4½ years just in the sheer number of funerals. A quick review yielded at least 22 times that I’ve helped many of you say “goodbye” to a loved one. And it is especially difficult this time of year, particularly for those who are facing that empty spot at the Christmas table for the first time.

So the question for us today is this: How do we transform all of these sorrows into something good? Can we find any answers in today’s texts? Let’s look first at Ps 126. This psalm depicts that time when King Cyrus of Babylon allowed the captive Jews to return to their homeland. The people of Israel were beside themselves with excitement. I can imagine they were pinching themselves to make sure they weren’t dreaming, as they headed home with laughter and singing after 70 years in a foreign land. Their testimony: (v.3) “The L ORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.” Sounds like our Advent theme, doesn’t it? “God’s Awesome Deeds We Did Not Expect.” The psalm goes on (v. 5) to guarantee that if we plant sow seeds with tears, we will, some day, gather in a harvest with songs of joy. Here then is our first answer: Our sorrow can be transformed into joy when, instead of focusing on our own circumstances, we focus on God’s glory, power, and faithfulness. It may not be in our time schedule, but eventually God will keep his promises. I’m reminded of the lyrics in a song called “Tunnel” by Third Day. “Well I won’t pretend to know what you’re thinking, And I can’t begin to know what you’re going through, And I won’t deny the pain that you’re feeling. But I’m gonna try and give a little hope to you, There’s so much your living for.....There’s a light at the end of this tunnel, There’s a light at the end of this tunnel for you, So keep holding on.” (3) In spite of our sorrow, we still can affirm that...God is loving...God is strong...God is faithful.

And what about our Isaiah 61 passage? Any answers there? Remember this was the text Jesus chose when he began his ministry. Invited one Sabbath to read the scripture in the synagogue, Jesus turned to this text: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives...to comfort all who mourn and to provide for those who grieve. To give them the oil of gladness instead of mourning, a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. When Jesus put down the scroll, he said “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, “I am the One about whom Isaiah was writing.” Here, then, is our second answer: Our sorrow can be transformed when we allow it to bring us closer to Jesus. He is the One who sets us free. He is the One who lifts our spirits from despair to hope. He is the One who has promised to walk with us through every dark valley.

Such must have been the experience of the Anabaptist martyrs in the 16th century. Many of them, even as they were being tortured in cruel and painful ways, were singing praises to God, sensing the powerful and reassuring presence of Jesus as they died for their faith in him. At a pastors’ meeting in North Lima on Friday, I asked the other pastors for their ideas on today’s question about transforming sorrow. One young guy, a Pastor Dan at Midway Mennonite, reminded me of those Anabaptist stories he’d been reading in the Martyr’s Mirror. He was taken aback by what he called “weird joy.” Meaning joy that just doesn’t make sense to our modern way of thinking. It caught my attention and made me ask, “Does anyone ever say that about me, that I have “weird joy”.” And then came embarrassment: Wow, my troubles are nothing in comparison! Why do I let small things like a few cloudy days steal my joy in the Lord, when others
can go singing to a martyr’s death?!

For our third and final answer we look at v. 3 of Isaiah 61. We, as followers of Jesus, are called “oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.” We are called to “…rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated.” You see, Jesus commands us to continue the work he began while on earth, “preaching good news to the poor, comforting those who mourn.” Becoming like him, people of compassion, as we saw at the beginning. To quote Parker Palmer again, “…suffering can never be solved. It can only be shared in compassion, shared in community.” Here are the words to v. 2 of the “Tunnel” song, “You got your disappointments and sorrows, You ought to share the weight of that load with me, Then you will find that the light of tomorrow, well, it brings new life for your eyes to see.. There's a light at the end of this tunnel.” You have probably heard this Swedish proverb before: “Shared joy is a double joy, shared sorrow is half a sorrow.” (4) Like Paul’s words in Rom. 12:15, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” So our last answer might sound something like this: Our sorrow can be transformed when it helps us bond more deeply with others in the community of faith. Some of the times I have felt closest to people here at Beech were those times when I cried with them in front of a casket. Perhaps the biggest mistake the benevolent angel made in Buber’s story was to try to take away people’s sorrow while still remaining aloof, in the comforts of heaven. Not realizing that to help transform another person’s sorrow, one must first be willing to enter their pain, walking beside them with a minimum of advice-giving.

The story, however, ends as it should, with the angel falling at the Lord’s feet, seeking to understand why he had failed. Realizing that for all his good intentions and diligent efforts, he was not God. Neither are we. Although Jesus calls us to be his servants, continuing his work, we can do nothing to transform sorrow without his direction and wisdom and strength. We fall back on his mercy and grace, asking once again that Jesus be present with us and show us his awesome deeds. It’s the prayer we now will sing in the song “Beauty for Brokenness” – STS #115. Notice, as we sing, the many situations of sorrow we face, as we try to bring beauty out of our brokenness, and as we ask God to ignite the flame of his love within our hearts.

Sources:
(1) *The Active Life* - Parker Palmer
(2) …Palmer
(3) www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/tunnel-lyrics-third....
(4) http://thinkexist.com/swedish_proverb