

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
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Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:16-21

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and open our hearts and our minds to your word, that hearing, we may believe, and in believing, we may trust our lives, this day and all the days that lie ahead to your love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Isaiah 61

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display God's glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; but you shall be called priests of the LORD, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. Because their shame

was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs.

For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Luke 4:16–21

When Jesus came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

We once again, as we often do at this time of year, as Advent comes to a close and we anticipate the arrival of Christ in the world, hear from the prophets.

The prophets give both a warning and a charge. The warning is given to remind people that they are not following God as they do not head the call of God. Prophets call people of faith to speak and act for those on the margins, those cast aside, those that are most vulnerable. In the prophet's call, we understand our world in light of God's justice, and we advocate for how things should be rather than how things are. We work toward dismantling oppression and injustice in active ways, even in the face of possible risk or harm.

To follow the way of God, to follow the call of the prophets, however, is not without cost or risk. Not too long after the death of representative John Lewis last year, people were fond of repeating his words, or would play a clip of him saying this, "never be afraid to make some noise and get in trouble, good trouble, necessary trouble." He knew of what he spoke. He risked his life. He was battered, bloodied and bruised.

Being prophetic, or to be a prophet means that there is risk involved because prophets stir up the status quo, to be prophetic is to name things as they are (which usually points out that they are not great) and to name how things should be according to God's desires.

The Hebrew word means "to speak for someone else."

Prophets seek justice. And seeking justice usually means messing with those in power because how that power is used means that people are oppressed or marginalized. And people in power don't tend to volunteer to give that power up. Prophets affirm that God is about those on the bottom.

We want systems and structure to work for the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But that is not how many of our systems work, or even how they were built. Often, the ones who lose out the most are the weakest, the most vulnerable, the most marginalized. But the prophets tell us, demand that this be reversed. That systems and society should work from the bottom up. That we should care for the most vulnerable first.

Noted Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann comments, “*The God who delivers* is the God who can disrupt any circumstance of social bondage and exploitation, overthrow ruthless orderings of public life, and authorize new circumstances of dancing freedom, dignity and justice. The verbs of deliverance refuse to accept as a given any circumstances of oppression”ⁱ

Isaiah 61 is one of the great deliverance passages from the prophets that affirms that God is a *God-who-delivers*.

The prophet’s call us to remember those on the margins, those on the bottom. Advent is a time where we recognize that the world is not as it should be. And we hold out a hope that the world could be better. We hear the call and the charge to be a part of making the world better.

Advent and the prophets also give us the space to hold grief, lament and mourning. And they give us the space and point to the promise of restoration, with special attention to those that need it the most. Isaiah talks about tangible healing and repair that will come.

The passage from Isaiah focuses on the people of Israel’s return from exile and has concern for what practices and systems will come into place when they return. As they rebuild the city and society, Israel has a chance to do things differently, so that they do not repeat the injustices

of the past that led to their exile. They have an opportunity to make a new normal, and not just to go back to former ways.

They have opportunity to pay attention to the vision that God has for a just and equitable society. Through the prophets, God speaks, what a just society could be, how the people can be part of the re-building effort. The prophets speak God's word of hope into a new future.

I heard a story in the aftermath of the tornadoes that ripped through this country that leaders from the town Greensburg, Kansas are meeting with leaders in towns in Kentucky that have been devastated and almost completely wiped out. The same was true for Greensburg in 2007 after a massive tornado flattened 95% of the structure in town. Over the course of many years, they rebuilt the town, but they did so in new and innovative ways. They changed everything, and now Greensburg is the greenest town in the country. Renewable energy powers the entire town. The leaders of Greensburg are hopeful they can pass along this vision as town after town rebuilds in Kentucky. It took courage and a new way of living for Greensburg. It took being prophetic. It can lead to a new future.

The new future that Isaiah proclaims is a future where people partner with God to bring about a better outcome. But it is a particular people that God calls.

Isaiah declares that it will be the poor, the brokenhearted, those that mourn, and the former captive and imprisoned who will "repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations" (verse 4).

One scholar asks, "Why is this so? Perhaps those on the receiving end of injustice and greed can envision an alternative way of being as a society. These partners can collaborate with God's designing word and not coerce the course back to a familiar repletion of the conditions which led

to destruction in the first place. Perhaps God knows that a society built from below is more just and beautiful than one built from on high with false promises of trickle-down justice and hope. Perhaps these are the people who will collaborate with God in reconstruction rather than serve false gods of greed, money, power.”ⁱⁱ

The words of Isaiah are echoed by the one we wait for this season, by Jesus. In beginning his ministry, Jesus reads from this passage in Isaiah. Jesus stands in the midst of his hometown, delivering his first sermon in the synagogue, and unfurls the scroll of Isaiah with its declaration of good news to the poor, and binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to those in captivity and release to those imprisoned, and providing the necessary strength from the spirit for those who mourn.

Jesus declares that the word is fulfilled in him and the people of his hometown, the people who watched him grow up, the people that taught him, maybe bought his first piece of furniture that he made, the people that ate supper at his house, his people. His hometown people do not like what they hear and drive him to the edge of the city ready to through him off a cliff.

But that is not the end of the story... it is just the beginning.

Proclamation is followed by action. The Word of God takes action in the world. The Spirit of God rests upon Jesus and comes to initiate repair and restoration from the inside out and the bottom up.

But the Spirit doesn't stop there.

The Spirit calls forth ones to partner in the rebuilding.

The gifts of the Spirit, that all of us possess, are given not just for our individual salvation alone, but for the sake of partnership in the work God calls forth for all of creation. The Spirit of God falls upon all flesh for tangible and real acts in the world.

Jesus declares that it is to the ones that are lost, those who are marginalized, those who are excluded, it is to these that Jesus comes *first*. That is the good news, it is to the very least that are first. And that means that for those of us that are not the least, for those of us who are not excluded, for those of us that have power and privilege, it means taking sides.

Elie Wiesel, author and holocaust survivor, said in his acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, “And that is why I swore never to be silent whenever, wherever human beings endure suffering and humiliation. We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must, at that moment, become the center of the universe.” Taking sides for those on the margins may mean denying our own interests, but with the knowledge that others liberation is our own as well.

The story of Advent is about the hope of new things. Advent is about the depth, breadth, and length that God goes to restore God’s image in us and to remind us of God’s call to us as unexpected people to be a part of God’s intended reign. This is not just some spiritual feel-good vision, but rooted in the prophets, rooted in the call for justice and restoration, Jesus and the prophets seek and expect action as well as proclamation.

The word of God impacts the world through Spirit-filled, Spirit-gifted helpers who have courage to name the wrongs of the world and labor for a world that reflects God’s design.

The last 20 months have been full of loss and grief, a time of exile and of crumbling of familiar systems and infrastructure. These

months have amplified and exacerbated the injustices of our societies. Those on the margins have been pushed further to the edge and will be the last to recover. When we begin to return and rebuild, like Israel, we have opportunity to do things differently, so that they do not repeat or intensify the injustices of the past. We have an opportunity to make a new normal, and not just to go back to former ways. We have opportunity to pay attention to the vision that God has for a just and equitable society. We have the opportunity to be prophets and be prophetic to speak God's word of hope into a new future.

“We [may] become the answers to the Advent prayers of those who hunger and thirst after justice, who cry out for liberation and who yearn for the promise of the Word made flesh, because the God who comes to us in Jesus is the One who ‘brings down the powerful from their thrones, lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty’.”ⁱⁱⁱ This is the hope of new things at Advent.

Amen.

ⁱ Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p208.

ⁱⁱ Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/spirit-of-the-lord-upon-me-2/commentary-on-isaiah-611-11-3>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://www.erc.org.au/justice_reflections_from_fr_claude_mostowik_091220