

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
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Isaiah 61

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.

We again hear from the prophet Isaiah this second week of Advent. Prophets give both a warning and a charge. The warning is given to remind people that they are not following God if 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.

But there are times as well, when the prophets bring a word of hope. If last week, the prophet was speaking to a people in exile, this week, there is the promise of a return from exile and a better future. The hopeful words this week from the prophet Isaiah may also sound familiar, but perhaps not because of the specific words, but more because of who repeats these words. In the gospel of Luke, when Jesus begins his public

ministry, he goes to the synagogue, and he rolls out the scroll of Isaiah and reads this passage about bringing God's favor.

It is a remarkable passage – filled with a host of metaphors that promise amazing things – a series of reversals and unexpected goodwill. Good news will be brought to the oppressed. The wounds of the brokenhearted will be bound. Liberty is declared to the captives. Those who mourn will be comforted. Instead of ashes, people will adorn garlands. The oil of gladness instead of mourning. Ruins will be built up once again from former devastation. It is what we sing in many Advent hymns, this reversal from past striving and destruction. A reversal from bondage and suffering. It is why we sing, O come, O come, Emmanuel. This is what it looks like when God gets to work.

Later in the passage, God declares that an everlasting covenant will be made between God and the people. This is a God of promise and of hope. But this promise, as Isaiah declares it, is not some vision of what once was, but it is a promise that moves into the future. It is not some nostalgic wish for what once was, or days gone by, but rather, it is a vision of a future based on God's past actions and faithfulness but looking toward the future. God is still active in the world, present amongst the people, and God is doing a new thing.

For those of us in the Christian tradition, we understand this new thing and this new covenant in the person of Jesus the Christ. The one who makes things right and declares the coming of the kingdom of God. The text from Isaiah begins with declaring that the spirit of the Lord is upon him, and that the prophet is anointed to bring this good news. When Jesus reads the scroll, he declares that he is the anointed one. Jesus then announces to those gathered in the synagogue that this vision of the good news has been fulfilled in their hearing. 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. This good news is difficult to hear for some.

In particular it may be difficult for those that might stand to lose something in the reversals Isaiah describes and that Jesus has said are fulfilled in him – it is a hard thing to hear. Because we so often work in such a way that we assume if someone wins something that it means another person will lose something. We don't often approach things thinking that the lowly can be lifted up without those already at the top being brought down. That absolutely might be difficult to hear. But I also wonder if it has to do with claiming to be God's anointed? Words are powerful, and this passage starts out strongly declaring that God's spirit has been poured out upon the prophet and he is anointed to bring the good news. Jesus takes on the claim of this anointing as well – and it gets him in trouble. Words are powerful things, and they shape our identity.

A few years ago, there was a video that several of my teacher friends shared on-line.¹ It was of a talk that a special education teacher gave to other educators. In this video, the teacher talked about the importance of words, and how they can shape our perceptions. She tells a story of an experience in a classroom with a student. She entered the second grade classroom, and at the center of the room was a boy sitting in a chair. The boy cursed, screamed, and spit, and the teacher and student looked at one another. She went closer to him, and whispered, "I know you have a big heart. I know that you are clever. I know that you are a good boy."

In front of the whole class, the boy said to the teacher, "Stupid teacher, you don't know anything. I'm a disturbed boy. Everyone knows I am disturbed. The teachers say I am disturbed. The headmaster says I am

disturbed. Even my parents say I am disturbed.” She said again, “You have a big heart, you are clever, and I know that you’re a good boy.”

The little boy ran out of the class. When the teacher entered the class the second week, it was the same thing. The boy cursed, screamed, and spit. The teacher took a deep breath, went close to the boy, and whispered, “You have a big heart, you’re clever, and I know you are a good boy.” The third week, when the teacher entered the class, a little chair was next to the teacher’s seat. On the little chair, was seated the boy. The boy had chosen to sit next to the teacher, he had decided she was his teacher.

Toward the end of the year, the boy asked the teacher how she knew children were good. The teacher told the boy that she had a secret. Until fifth grade she didn’t know how to read or write. She didn’t know how to connect numbers together. She thought she was stupid and that she had a broken brain. She was sure that nothing good could come out of her. She once was a young girl, in a special needs class, and people were ready to give up on her more than once, and now she was a teacher in that very same system working to change that system, to show that it can be done differently.

She closes the video with an impassioned appeal directly to the educators. She says, “Teachers, headmasters, educators, your thoughts and the words you use about a child will at some stage become the thoughts and words that the child thinks about himself. ‘I won’t succeed, nothing good will become of me, I am incapable, I’m lazy, I can’t...’ There is no child that can’t, only a child that can! Remember always that education is the forming of impressions on souls.”

This teacher was a prophet anointed to bring Good News. Prophets affirm that God is about those on the bottom. We want systems and structures to work for the greatest good for the greatest number of people. But that is not how 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.

This 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.”

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 teacher could envision a different way because she had experienced a broken system. She had the courage and hope that something could be better. Isaiah’s vision points to the promise of retortion, with special attention to those that need it most. Isaiah talks about tangible healing and repair.

What powerful words to hear, my spirit is poured out in you, and you are anointed to bring the good news. This message isn’t just for Isaiah or for Jesus – but it is for us as well. When we take that message to heart, how might it shape us? How might it form us? Are there places where our brokenness can be a vision for something better? What does it mean if we are appointed as God’s messenger? And not just messenger, but a

participant and co-creator with God in the world? Can we see ourselves as that?

We are anointed to be messengers of the good news. We might see this as the commissioning that we all receive as anointed ones in Christ and submit to the words of Teresa of Avila. “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which God looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which God walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which God blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are God’s body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

It is sometimes difficult to view ourselves in this role, as God’s anointed, but that is the way in which the love of God is shown in the world. Through us. And the more we can see ourselves the way God sees us – as beloved children of God – integral to the coming kingdom of peace and justice in the world, the more we see and show the love of God to the world. Can we see ourselves the way God sees us?

Love *sees*, and love sees something no one else can see. Someone once said, “to love someone is not first of all to do things for them, but to reveal to them their beauty and value, to say to them through our attitude, ‘You are beautiful. You are important. I trust you. You can trust yourself....’ To love someone is to reveal to them their capacities for life, the light that is shining in them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Our capacities for life, the gifts and light that God has given us mean that we are a part of the process of declaring God’s justice in the world. We are participants in the Advent of God. It’s not that God needs us necessarily, as much as it is that we are God here and now, and the world needs visible signs of God’s love, and God has chosen us as the messengers of that love. We are the messengers of the Advent of God.

In his Advent Credo, the South African pastor Alan Boesak found it just as important to name what is not true as what is true. And I leave you with his words, that they may also be ours. He writes:

It is not true that creation and the human family are doomed to destruction and loss—

This is true: For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life;

It is not true that we must accept inhumanity and discrimination, hunger and poverty, death and destruction—

This is true: I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is not true that violence and hatred should have the last word, and that war and destruction rule forever—

This is true: Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder, his name shall be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, the Everlasting, the Prince of peace.

It is not true that we are simply victims of the powers of evil who seek to rule the world—

This is true: To me is given authority in heaven and on earth, and lo I am with you, even until the end of the world.

It is not true that we have to wait for those who are specially gifted, who are the prophets of the Church before we can be peacemakers—

This is true: I will pour out my spirit on all flesh and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions and your old men shall have dreams.

It is not true that our hopes for liberation of humankind, of justice, of human dignity of peace are not meant for this earth and for this

history—

This is true: The hour comes, and it is now, that the true worshipers shall worship God in spirit and in truth.^{iv}

So let us enter Advent in hope, even hope against hope. Let us see visions of love and peace and justice. Let us affirm with humility, with joy, with faith, with courage: Jesus Christ, the life of the world.

Amen

ⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G0Lar94iNFM>

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

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://thejulianway.org/blog/2015/12/18/jean-vanier-quote>

^{iv} <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/477-allan-boesak-advent-credo>