

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Third Sunday in Advent (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-25; John 1:6-8, 19-28

My, How Things Change(d)!!

December 13, 2020

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. 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.”

“For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrong; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

What do you want for Christmas? We hear that question quite frequently at this time of year. This year, of course, the standard answer is that we want an end to COVID; we want a cure; we want a vaccine. We want the coming year to be a very different year from the one that will soon come to a close. We want to hug our kids and grand kids. We want to be able to go out without a mask. More than anything, we just want this COVID stuff to be over. We want to feel the joy of life once again.

I know that joy has been an elusive feeling in these days. Anticipating this sermon, I sent an email this week that speaks of joy. That’s the message of this third week of Advent. Traditionally this Sunday was known as Gaudete, Latin for *rejoice!* We see the theme of joy in the opening words of our epistle lesson, as Paul declares: **“Rejoice always”** (1 Thessalonians 5:16, ESV). We don’t see it directly in the Gospel lesson, except that John the Baptist comes to bear witness to the coming Lord, who is the real reason for our joy. And we see it in our text today as Isaiah says: **“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God.**

My dear people, loved by God, we need the message of Isaiah in our lives today. In a world that is so filled with confusion, frustration, anxiety and uncertainty we need a message of joy. We long for joy when so many of the things that bring us joy have to be prohibited for everyone’s well-being; things like our holiday gatherings with family and friends, or our carolling together to bring joy to other homes. When our plans to be with our extended families or travelling home for Christmas cannot be undertaken, we need a message of joy. Even without COVID we know that the devil works so hard to keep us from the joy that God gives us in Jesus Christ. That is why Isaiah’s words are so important. They assure us that God is at work to bring us His salvation. When God is at work my, how things change, and they have changed so gloriously for us in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah’s words are some of the most comforting and uplifting words in Scripture. Isaiah announces the Coming One, and the Messiah speaks through these words to declare what His coming means for lost, hurting and helpless sinners like you and like me. The Anointed of the Lord declare: **“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.**

The Saviour, the Christ (and Christ means “anointed”) comes to bring good news. Yet it is not just news; it is the action of our God that changes things so dramatically. He comes to bind up the brokenhearted. He comes to set free the captives. He comforts the grieving. He declares—and ushers in—the time of the Lord’s favour for all the people of our world.

The Anointed One: Christ, the Messiah, does this by setting right what sin has made so wrong. When Isaiah spoke these words,

he was speaking to a people much like us. They had forgotten the Lord. They were living on their own terms, following the false gods of their pagan neighbours. God had to take some drastic actions to bring His people back. He did not want them to turn from Him and His grace forever. And so He let them lose their joy as they were carried into captivity in Babylon. Their homes were gone. Loved ones died in the onslaught of the Babylonian army. Things looked very bleak, to say the least.

Yet God has good news for His people. A time of deliverance was coming. The captives would return home. Sorrow, grief and mourning would give way to joy and celebration. Joy and gladness would return. My, how things change, when God is at work for the sake of His people! Even though there are times of sorrow, there is also the *year of the LORD's favor*. Don't think too literally that there is only a year of favour. It is the assurance that when God acts, everything is different. In His love, all things work for our good.

But Isaiah wasn't only looking at the end of the Babylonian Captivity. God was bringing an even greater promise to His people. Early in His ministry, Jesus returned to Nazareth, where He had grown up. He went to the synagogue, as was His habit, and was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to read. The words before Him were the words of our text. After reading them, Jesus said to the people: ***"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*** (Luke 4:21, ESV)

Yes, Jesus is the Anointed One, the One who brings good news; who brings comfort; who brings the Lord's favour. At the beginning of Advent, I mentioned the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow which we know as the carol, *"I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"*. As Longfellow saw the suffering and uncertainty around him during the days of the US Civil War, he wrote: *"And in despair I bowed my head; There is no peace on earth," I said; For hate is strong, And mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"* That can be our feeling, too. But Longfellow didn't stop there. He assures us: *"Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men."*

God does not sleep. He knows our needs, and He has done what needed to be done. He came to our rescue in that manger, so long ago. Yet look at the picture on the screen. Casting its shadow over the manger is the cross—that cross where the Lord did change things. That is why He came, so that through His sacrifice of His own holy, sinless life on that cross we can be set free from our captivity to sin. By the way, if you don't feel trapped by sin, that doesn't mean you are free from sin. As Jesus reminds us: ***"Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin."*** (John 8:34, ESV) We are captives. We are condemned. We mourn and struggle, because the sin in us and in our world brings pain and suffering and death. It brings the terrible reality of eternal death in hell.

But how things change in Christ! He brings freedom to all those captive in sin. He took all our cares into Himself, and paid the price of our sin and disobedience as He dies in our place on the cross. With Isaiah we can say: ***I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.*** He sets us free and in His forgiveness we are the ***oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.***

In that forgiveness comes another glorious change. The Lord who died for us rose again to conquer death and the grave. In His resurrection from the dead our mourning and fear of death give way to a joy that cannot be taken away. *"He lives to silence all my fears, He lives to wipe away my tears. He lives to calm my troubled heart, He lives all blessings to impart."* (LSB 461, st. 5) He takes away our anxiety and fear and doubt, giving us the hope of all that is ours through faith in Him.

We live in a world where we struggle between expectation and anxiety. We want something better. There is something better. Things change in Christ. Things are changed in Christ! You can approach each day with the joy that comes from knowing God's love for you, and that His power is at work for your good. Go into that day with prayer in your heart, and tell Him what He already knows—tell Him the things that worry or frighten you. Seek His grace. And thank Him. Thank Him that you were able to get out of bed to face another day. Thank Him that He has a purpose for your life, and that He will bring it to completion in His time and according to His gracious plan. Thank Him that you are His child through your Baptism, and that you—a poor, miserable sinner, are forgiven for the sake of His Son, who died and rose for you.

And trust Him. This good news from Isaiah is for you, too. Christ came to change your sorrow and sadness into joy and celebration. He came to give you life in the place of death. He changes everything, so that in Him we have hope. We can rejoice, for as Paul said in our Epistle lesson: ***"He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it."*** (1 Thessalonians 5:24, ESV) Amen.