

King of Glory Lutheran Church
December 12/13, 2020
Year B: Advent 3: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he 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;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ 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 his glory.
⁴ 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 wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ 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.
¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being 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 with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ 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.*

The prophet Isaiah speaks to us throughout the season of Advent and Christmas.

He first spoke to his people whose homeland was invaded. A people whose lives were turned upside down. A people who were forced into exile and eventually returned home.

At first glance we may not understand why Zion, the people of Jerusalem, are in mourning as the prophet says in verse 3.

Well it turns out that going home is not always what you hoped it would be. Have you ever had that experience?

The people Isaiah speaks to today are having trouble adjusting to the home they have returned to. Nothing is the same as it was, real or remembered. There is disagreement about how to move forward. They have not rebuilt the city or the temple as it was before the invasion, destruction and exile. The expectations people had have not been met. And so there is mourning, grief and frustration and despair.

In Advent seasons past I would not have heard the prophet's words as I do this year. I hear with new ears the experience of those who have lost what they knew and all that was familiar. I have a new understanding for people who just want everything to get back to normal.

Today I wonder if we have some things in common with these people Isaiah speaks to this year. I wonder how this pandemic will change us and has changed us. I wonder if and how we will return to what we used to know. For us too nothing will be exactly the same as it was before.

Our children just told the Christmas story to us in a new way, different from years past. Outside, in a stable, on a bright sunny day. And I'm guessing that for many of you those children that you knew a year ago look taller, bigger, and older now. They have grown and changed. They are not the same as they were last year. None of us are. But it is especially striking to see growth and change in the youngest among us.

This weekend we will gather together by Zoom as a congregation on December 13 for our annual meeting. As we look back on this year we just might be surprised by the change and growth of our ministry during this pandemic. So much is different about how we worship, serve our community and support one another. And yet we have done all those things.

We have all changed and been stretched in new ways this past year. Not by our own choosing. But we have continued to grow in faith and love and service with God's help.

Even as we all long to get back to normal, we know that we will never be exactly the same as we were. For those of you who have lived many years in this world you know that experiences change us and we can learn from them. Grief, disappointment, anxiety...God knows all of these experiences and emotions and walks with us through them. And in times like these God gives us hope for a future where we will know joy again.

The prophet Isaiah tells the people of Zion that they will be changed. Their mourning will be replaced with joy. I wonder if they could even imagine that possibility looking around at the destruction of Jerusalem? Can you? Can you imagine your mourning, your grief, your anxiety, your sadness turned into joy?

One of the great promises God holds for us is the promise of transformation. Those who mourn will know joy. The city that was destroyed will be rebuilt. The garden that seems dead will come to life again.

Dr. Elna Solvang, Professor of Religion at Concordia College says, “Transforming the ‘former devastations’ will require more than a memory of the past and a promise to build... A new future is possible because God promises to be in ‘everlasting covenant with them’ and because God has provided the appropriate work clothes: garments of salvation and robes of righteousness. The city where hopelessness had taken root will, by God’s spirit and by God’s blessing, sprout righteousness and praise.”

Where there was hopelessness there will be salvation from God. And the prophet Isaiah tells us what that salvation looks like: good news, healing, liberty, release, and comfort.

Salvation is described with pictures we can imagine for ourselves. Like a restored city and a wonderfully thriving garden. Salvation is for us now, in this world. It is something that can be seen and something we are invited to be a part of.

In the gospel of Luke 4 Jesus stands up in the synagogue in Nazareth and reads these words from Isaiah that we heard today,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And then Jesus says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today salvation has come. The hope and transformation that were promised are fulfilled in Jesus. And as he shares the words of Isaiah he brings to life his ministry and purpose and promise for us.

For you and I, longing today for what was and wondering what the future will be God gives us good news. It is hard for us to imagine today but these promises are for us. There is good news, saving news for us. By God’s grace and love we will know healing, liberty, release, and comfort.

So where is this salvation we long for today? How are we being transformed even in these difficult times? How will our God continue to work through us in the days and weeks and months and years ahead?

Perhaps this Advent season is a time of preparation for us for the transformation God is about. Transformation that we cannot imagine but that we know is our gift and promise.

On this 3rd Sunday in Advent we have heard again the Christmas story and know the promise of salvation and love brought to life by the birth of Jesus. We light the candle of Joy on our Advent wreath. Joy, in the midst of suffering and death, uncertainty, frustration and grief. Joy that was promised to the people of Zion and is God's promise for us today.

I invite you now to sing the hymn "Carol at the Manger" which is a hymn written by Marty Haugen set to the tune he wrote that we are more familiar with as the hymn "Joyous Light" that is part of the Holden Evening Prayer service.

It begins with these words, "Holy Child within the manger, long ago yet ever near; come as friend to every stranger, come as hope for every fear. As you lived to heal the broken, greet the outcast, free the bound, as you taught us love unspoken, teach us now where you are found."

May you too know healing and bring healing to others, may you know belonging and extend hospitality to the forgotten, may you experience freedom and release those who are bound, may you know God's abundant love and share that love today and every day. And by these gifts and the grace of God I pray, hope and trust that our mourning will turn into joy.

Amen.