

Good News

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Our scripture reading for this third Sunday of Advent provides good news, a job description and a mission statement about God's intention. The words spoken are good news because they are full of promise and reassurance. They speak of justice, hope, anticipation, and deliverance to the people as a reminder that God has not forgotten them. The prophet Isaiah tells us that God's presence before all the nations is viable and real.

Sometimes it is difficult for our ears to hear the biblical imagery of yesterday, but we cannot deny the condition of our world today. Specifically, we cannot overlook the fact that many people, even in this holiday season, are feeling "oppressed," "brokenhearted," "captive," or "imprisoned" in some way and wondering when God's transformation will take place. We are reminded by these words of Isaiah that Advent is a time of waiting and preparation for God to transform the world through Jesus Christ. Isaiah's words tell us that this transformation is not to be an empty hope but a sure promise.

But you ask: "Where is God's transformation revealed today? What is God doing today in the lives of the people that offers hope and restoration to our broken world?" It is far easier to see the transformation of the secular world during this season of the year. Many of us get caught up in giving gifts, indulging in food and sharing the holiday traditions with our family and friends. Our homes, workplaces, and communities are transformed with bright lights, Christmas music, and Christmas pageantry galore. Our schedules are suddenly transformed into tireless activities leading to near-exhaustion and fatigue.

Even amid the greenery, candles, and mangers in our sanctuaries, it is often difficult to see God's transformation "spring[ing] up before all the nations" (v. 11). The real definition of Advent is something that Isaiah challenges us to ponder on this third Sunday of Advent. We do not need to look too far to see the injustice of poverty, abuse, hunger, oppression, and war. Yet our Christmas distractions often speak louder than Isaiah's call for God's transformation. Our eyes tend to drift away from the biblical text, and Isaiah's words fall on deaf ears. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus spoke these words of Isaiah as a reminder that God's advent is a transformation that will alter our personal lives and the world in which we live.

Donald Booz

Isaiah's message is one of salvation and mission. Isaiah challenges us to name salvation as a quality of life here and now that reflects God's desires for human community. So what is salvation in our scripture? It is good news, healing, liberty, release, and comfort (61:1-2). It is "the year of the Lord's favor," a reference to the jubilee year, in which debts are wiped away, slaves are freed, fields are allowed to rest, and land is returned to its original owners (Lev. 25:1-23; Deut. 15:1-15). The message is one of "release" and "liberty" (61:1). The time designated to release the slaves; a year of tax exemption; a holy year that marks the return of property to its original owners and the return of indentured Israelites to their familial households and land (Lev. 25:8-17). "Liberty" means more than freedom; it involves a socioeconomic reconfiguration of community (see Lev. 25:18-55). The nations of the world will see what God has done for Israel and us and will know "that they *and we are* a people whom the LORD has blessed" (61:9), reaffirming that Isaiah's vision is not a promise of pie in the sky. God's deliverance is real, tangible, and this-worldly. It can be seen by others. It is true that we look forward to being with God in the future, but God's salvation is meant to transform the world here and

now. Jews and Christians are invited to participate in this salvific living, even in the midst of a world not yet fully redeemed.

Since salvation is not another place and time but the reality of this world as it should be, then Isaiah asks us to think about how we might participate in ushering in God's "real world." Being missional, in light of this passage, means profoundly challenging all forms of cultural Christianity that would make "church" an end in itself, a community of the saved devoted to maintaining a building, a set of programs, and a fellowship of the like-minded. If Isaiah reveals what salvation looks like, then what is the proper form of mission that corresponds to God's salvific intentions? First, mission happens when Christians and Jews turn our attention to those who are named as the recipients of the good news: the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mournful, the faint of spirit. Our scripture reveals God's special concern for the lowest and the weakest. In order to participate in God's mission of restoration, the people of God are sent first to those who most need to hear that God will provide for them and will redeem their losses. Mission is not primarily something that *goes out from* God's people—by sending money or sending missionaries—but something that *defines* God's people, as existing for the sake of the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and mournful.

Second, mission happens when the nations of the world notice that the people of God live differently, that "they are a people whom the LORD has blessed" ([61:9](#)). There may be a bit of payback in this (let those who have oppressed us see how well off we are now!), this is not all that is going on. The concern that the nations *see* God's salvation of Israel makes sense if we look back to Isaiah's prophecy in which God says, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" ([49:6](#)), and ahead to the last chapter of Isaiah, "I am coming to gather all nations and tongues" ([Isa. 66:18](#)).

A restored Israel, living as a jubilee community, will stand as a sign of God's blessing to the nations around it. To be missional is to live as a people of good news, liberation, justice, and comfort in such a way that the world may take notice and be drawn to the ways of God. So long as Christians live as divided people, known to the world as those who judge, fight, and exclude, the church will fail to be missional, no matter how much money we give and how many missionaries we send. **Scott Bader-Saye**

This good news comes with a price. We live in a time of war, injustice, poverty, and greed; and the word of the prophet taunts a nation that has grown rich in things but poor in soul. We smile on the outside, but live with relationships severed, addictions hidden, violence barely domesticated, depression denied, affairs raging, self-loathing, greed, hatred and fear! If that were not enough; we deny welcome to for whom we make no room at the inns of privilege: the elderly poor, children without health care, refugees from predominately Muslim countries, the homeless schizophrenic. Have we not been anointed to bring good news to these? As Flannery O'Connor once wrote to a friend, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." Yet the God who can build up ancient ruins is also the God who can redeem the ruin a prodigal son who believes he has made a wreck of his life; the God who shall raise up the former devastations is also the God who means to pick up a daughter's broken parts; the God who shall repair the ruined cities and the devastations of many generations is also the God who can repair even the ruined nation that has forgotten its way in the world.

Our mission is to give God's good news of mercy to everyone we meet. This includes: those who are oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, and imprisoned, the gay uncle, the unwed mother, the woman who has chosen to abort her pregnancy, the non-Christian, tortured enemy combatants, the illegal immigrant, the grieving one

in a hospital waiting room. Have we not been anointed to bring good news to these as well? The One whose sandals we are unworthy to untie has gone before us, and we are here merely to prepare the way, to shout in so many words, "Repent!"

The carol that comes to mind is *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. Our congregation is to be that little town: the crossroads where the hopes and fears of all the years meet. We are that place where we allow the good news to become our owe and change us by God grace and share that grace with others. **Cynthia A. Jarvis**

This is good news indeed!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year B, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.