

Homecoming

December 13, 2020

Isaiah 61: 1-4 and 8-11

¹ 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...

⁸ 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.

1st Thessalonians 5: 16-24

¹⁶ Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil.

²³ May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.



We began this worship series two weeks ago with the reminder to stay awake, to be alert, to be ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ. Last week, as we

continued our Advent series, we heard John the Baptist calling from the wilderness, encouraging us to prepare the way for the Lord, to make straight paths within our hearts to receive Christ. As we continue in this season of anticipation and expectation, this morning we first hear the call from Isaiah to be ones who help others to prepare their hearts to receive the Lord as Messiah. In doing so we will be living examples of righteousness and in this way we will invite others to praise the Lord. Paul connects into this call from Isaiah as well, reminding us to be faith, hope, and love in the world. Allowing these parts of our faith to shine into the world, we witness to our faith, joining with John the Baptist, pointing to the light that was coming into the world. This morning, as we seek to prepare ourselves for the homecoming of Christ, as we seek to invite others to join us on this journey of faith, let us begin with a word of prayer...



What comes to mind when you see this image of the destruction caused by this hurricane? In the image there is incredible damage done to this home, not just to the land around it. There is a need for recovery, to rebuild

what was damaged. While this is true, it is also true that the damage is never just physical. A home is more than a physical place. Many of you have seen similar pictures of devastation following tragic events. Think for a moment of these images that you have seen – maybe it is of the Twin Towers in the aftermath, just after the planes hit on 9/11; maybe it is of blackened timbers and structures, the damage caused by wildfires; or, maybe it is solitary widow or widower standing by the fresh grave of their beloved spouse. In each case, there are people affected, lives are forever changed.

Look deeper into this picture. We can see a man sitting there in a yellow shirt. Or think of the images of destruction that came to your mind and imagine the



person or people affected. Yes, the physical structure can be rebuilt or replaced, but what of the “home” that held so much for this man or for those persons affected by a similar tragedy? In addition to the physical restoration, there is also a need to rebuild the emotional and spiritual components that were damaged by the tragedy. Our God is the one who faithfully steps into these places of brokenness and hurt. Our God also invites us, as disciples of Jesus Christ, to join him as we seek to bring restoration and to welcome home all who are lost and hurting, all who are hopeless and grieving.



Turn with me to Isaiah 61 as we explore the themes of the prophet's joyful proclamation. Isaiah begins by reminding his readers of the power of the Spirit of the Lord. Like the prophet Isaiah, like John the Baptist, and like Jesus himself, we are called to rely upon the Spirit of the Lord. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Isaiah proclaims the good news that his ministry will indeed restore Israel. In Luke 4 Jesus applies these same words to the good news that his ministry will bring. Anointed with the Spirit, Isaiah will *"bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release the prisoners, proclaim the year of the LORD's favor"*. The people will receive a crown of beauty instead of ashes, they will receive the oil of blessing instead of the oil of mourning, they will sing songs of praise and celebration instead of songs of grief and death.

All of these things will be signs or displays of God's glory. Restored as a nation, Isaiah prophesies that the people of God will *"build up the ancient ruins... raise up the former devastations... repair the ruined cities... the devastations of many generations"*. The home that they once knew and loved will be renewed and restored. Wrongs will be made right as the people seek to live out God's ways. In Isaiah 61 we read that God loves justice and hates wrongdoing. We also see here that God also expects his children to love justice and hate wrongdoing. God will establish an everlasting covenant with the faithful. Through this covenant, Isaiah tells the people that they will be *"known among the nations"* and that they will be a people *"whom the Lord has blessed"*. As part of that blessing, the people of God will be clothed in *"garments of salvation"* and the Lord God will *"cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations"*.

All will recognize the faithful because they will reflect God's character and love. As we saw in last week's text from Isaiah 40, the prophet acknowledges the reality of their current time of mourning as he recalls the ashes and devastation that have befallen Israel. The lengthy time of mourning had led the people to question God's presence and to doubt his care for them. The people of God even questioned if it was God that had caused their pain and suffering. In today's passage, Isaiah reminds them that God is not the cause of their pain or their suffering. He reminds them that God has been and will always be present in the midst of the pain and suffering - and the grief and heartache that accompanies such things. As their story unfolds, the children of God will see that their God is present, guiding them forward, leading to a homecoming, to a time and place of gladness and praise emerging from the despair and devastation. This is what Isaiah is speaking about in today's passage.

As we begin to turn our gaze towards Christmas Eve, we see how this amazing history is repeated in a most incredible way. God will become present, taking on flesh as a baby. This infant will grow up, being fully present with the children of God, as he further reveals the glory of God. Emerging from the time of testing in the wilderness, Jesus went to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth and read these words from Isaiah 61, verses one and two. Claiming to be the one sent to bring good news to poor, to release the captives, to liberate the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, Jesus said to those gathered there in the synagogue that day, *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"*. In the incarnation of Christ these things and more are made into a present reality. Today, we continue to see this reality as we seek to be a part of God's plan to bring universal justice, to put an end to prejudice, to give true equality to all.

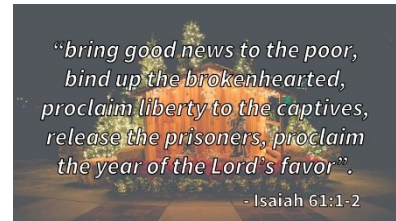


Turn with me now to John 1, one of the other lectionary readings for this week. At the start of his gospel, John writes about John the Baptist's ministry, about the transition to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, and on to the choice that we all have to believe in Jesus. I will be reading verses six through thirteen.

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

John came and testified to Jesus, to the light that was coming into the darkness. Once in the world, once ministering to the people of God, to "*his own people*", Jesus was rejected. Verse eleven: "*his own people did not accept him*". The choice was theirs just as it was once our choice. For all who have accepted Jesus as Lord, for all who receive him and believe in his name, God gives the "*power to become children of God*", being born not of the flesh but of the Spirit of God. Being born of the Spirit, we are empowered to become a part of the mission laid out by Isaiah and claimed by Jesus.

Born of the Spirit, we are called to *"bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, release the prisoners, proclaim the year of the LORD's favor"*. This good news is certainly needed in these times.

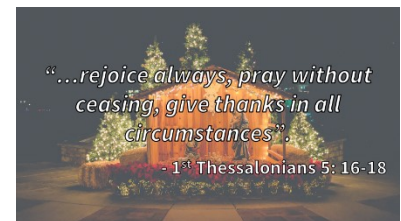


To understand better how we are to live into this call, into this mission, please turn with me to 1st

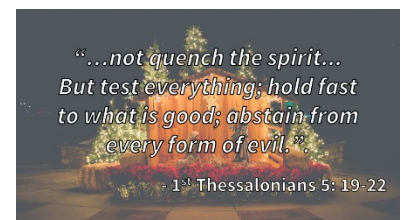
Thessalonians 5. In this passage, Paul offers three

directives for the church and these are especially important in times of disaster or suffering – like these current times that we now live in. The first speaks of the outward signs that we are to manifest as Christians:

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances". These three outward signs mirror Isaiah's call to be a crown of beauty, oil of blessing, and songs of praise.



The second directive from Paul is to *"not quench the Spirit... but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil"*. We can be so quick to

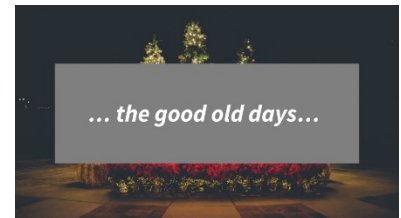


quench the Spirit, so fast to be just like the Israelites, questioning and doubting, being caught up in fear. We test things in a variety of ways. The first way is to turn to scripture, to search for what God has to say or to study what Jesus said or did in a similar circumstance. The second way is to seek good Christian counsel. Whether that is in a solid book or within your small group or within your friend or family circle, we are a great resource for one another.

The third and most important way is to take it to God in prayer. Seek his will and guidance in prayer. Lean into God in a time of silence, listen for his voice.

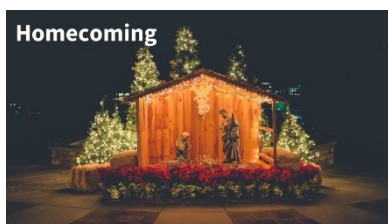
The last part of Paul's second directive is to "*abstain from every form of evil*". We do so by keeping good company, by attending to and practicing the disciplines of faith, by intentional choices to avoid situations where we are tempted. In adhering to these three directives we, as people of faith, come to know and live out what this passage from 1st Thessalonians concludes with. In the last verses, Paul points out that God is faithful, so he will sanctify us and make us blameless, enabling us to stand firm before the Lord. Our faith is the source of our strength for today and our hope for all of our tomorrows. In God we can trust.

One of the dangers of a tragedy or of being away from home for too long is the danger of slipping into thinking only of the "good old days". Like a good old-fashioned



homecoming event, the thirty- and forty- and fifty- and sixty- and seventy- and eighty-year-olds reminisce about the days when they were sixteen and seventeen, when life was so good, when they held the world by the tail, we too can look back at 2019 and beyond and can slip into thinking of what was. In these pandemic times, the church is just one place where we long for the way it used to be. We long for the days when the sanctuary was full, when the Sunday school rooms and youth group gatherings were brimming with young people, when we could gather for coffee and treats after church.

When we get stuck here, the greatest danger is that we limit our ability to imagine the “what ifs” and to think creatively as we seek and work to develop the potential for what could be. Yes, my friends, the current pandemic is our wilderness. We have been here so long, like the Israelites of Isaiah’s time in Babylon, that we feel like this is our new and forever reality. While we will not be here forever, the reality is also true that things will never be like they were before we heard the words “coronavirus” and COVID-19.



Leadership made the difficult decision to remain as we are, offering online worship only through December as one of our efforts to keep in alignment with Bishop

Ough’s call to do no harm. In what feels like ashes, in what feels like ruins as we consider a Christmas Eve not in the sanctuary, at the church we are seeing the wonder of creativity and what-if thinking. Families with children are being organized to be a part of a new and imaginative Children’s Christmas program. You can see the fruit and joy of this labor during the 1:30 Children’s Christmas Eve online service. Many hearts and minds are working together to plan and bring together a parking lot Christmas Eve service, complete even with singing “Silent Night” as we light our candles and stand together as the body of Christ. Yes, this year has not been what we would ever hope for or even what we could have imagined in our wildest dreams. Yet God is faithful and has remained our guide and our way, just as God has always been.

As I close this morning, I encourage you to invite your families, friends, and neighbors to be with us next Sunday as we lean into the celebration coming on Christmas Eve and then again in just four days as we celebrate the arrival of the light, the Christ child, the Savior of the world. Let us pray...

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Faith is ever a journey, complete with stops in the valleys and on the mountaintops. In the coming weeks of Advent, how do you hope to grow in your relationship with God?
- 2) *Pray*. Who do you know that needs restoration and healing? Pray that you can play a role, working with and through the Holy Spirit.
- 3) *Study*. Read 1st Thessalonians 5: 6-11. In the next eleven days, how can you help others to stay awake, to know "*faith, love, and salvation*"? How can Christmas Eve be an opportunity to "*encourage and build up*" others?