

“The Good News of Deliverance”

Salado UMC, Salado, Tx 76571—Preaching Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

13 December 2020—Third Sunday of Advent

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“Sickness and healing are in every heart; death and deliverance in every hand”

Orson Scott Card—(*Speaker for the Dead*).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

61 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 (Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11).

My guess is that most Christians have their own prized scripture passages. Yet, there is a New Testament endorsement in Luke for Isaiah 61. Luke's Jesus uses Isaiah as Jesus preaches his first sermon in the hometown Nazareth synagogue. The location of this Isaiah passage from Luke, although a paraphrase of Isaiah 61:1-2, makes any reader aware of the prophet's promises. They have power as wielded upon Luke. For oppressed people, Isaiah's prophecy represents the highest hopes and dreams that Israel could envision. God encourages the spirits of the downcast according to Isaiah. The reversal of fortune is a magnificent promise. It imbues hope in an otherwise anxious situation. What could have been a more powerful word to the world into which Jesus was born? Faced with economic, political, and military turmoil—all courtesy of the Romans—faithful Jews were desperate for a word of hope-filled promise. Most people can endure any situation if the future looks unlike the present. Isaiah paints this picture for the prophet's people. Later, Luke inherits this superb promise, representing hopes God furnishes in Jesus.

The passages' context is evidently the task of rebuilding which the people of Israel met upon return from their exile. Various conquering armies had over time devastated Jerusalem. The phrase "those who mourn in Zion" indicates a link between Jerusalem and Zion. The text announces that God reverses Israel's previous misfortunes. There is to be a new day for those steadfast to Yahweh's promise.

For people who have lost hope or expectancy today, what with the world's situation, a return to the word of hope-filled promise requires a new hearing. When current Christians revisit Isaiah's vision, we also return to God's promise that has sustained the faithful.

Our text begins with an unidentified prophet declaring that God anoints this prophet to speak "good news." The substance of Isaiah's message is first that Yahweh will build up the people returning from exile. In addition, the prophet proclaims "the year of the Lord's favor," no doubt a reference to a jubilee year. Jubilee is that measure of time, "seven years of seven years," when Israel freed its slaves and returned land to its original owners. In a jubilee year all begins afresh—even with debt clemency. Jubilee

means a new start as Yahweh revives Israel. A second component of the prophet's message is that Yahweh also builds up Zion. Thus, the promise is that God's vision will reconstitute both the people's fortunes and the holy city's fortunes. Yahweh reverses the people's fate and Jerusalem's fate. By the way, the reconstituted people will rebuild the holy city Jerusalem.

This text provides us with a wealth of reversal images. A few images: "liberty to the captives," "a garland instead of ashes," and "the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." Each of these images is a reversal. We replace the despairing and dismal by God's promise of loving-kindness via the prophet's message.

Vv. 8-11 provides several windows through which to see Yahweh's mercy and grace poured upon God's returning people. Yahweh speaks first. The Lord declares what Yahweh loves: justice. Yahweh also declares what Yahweh hates: robbery and wrongdoing. Following these assertions, is the promise of an everlasting covenant with the faithful. The text then describes these new people. When the other nations see these new covenant people, they see "a people whom the Lord has blessed."

Finally, the prophet rejoices, outwardly singing praise songs to Yahweh. These joyful songs recount how Yahweh blessed the life of the prophet, and the fortunes of Israel. Justice marks the lives of this new people, re-formed in Yahweh's righteousness. As this occurs, the people will truly come home again.

Christmas homecoming ties together this theme in our minds. In communities we Christmas people "come home for the holidays." Some cultured people like us twentieth-first century citizens may ridicule "a Currier and Ives" or "Norman Rockwell" image of home and hearth. We also know all too well that there has to be more to life than mere buying and selling. We all hope that life can again have meaning and purpose. The month of December gives all but the most cold-hearted a radiance of hope. Perhaps for some, this feeling remains largely unnamed; but for many it is the hope to return to simpler times. To allow this text to do its work, I suggest that we embrace the authentic failings of this age. Thus, a faithful reading reminds us all that to return home remembers that homecoming is God's gift. It is not a thing we ourselves create out of whole cloth. Christmas, and its ramp up in Advent, recognizes finally that to be fully human is to rely on God for a gift we cannot give ourselves. Isaiah reminds Jesus' generation and ours: "The Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." This is God's Christmas gift to us in Christ Jesus.

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