

THE GRACIOUS WORK OF JESUS CHRIST

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is the First Reading read before, Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11: **“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me because the LORD has anointed Me to tell good news to poor people. He has sent Me to bandage up broken-hearted people, to announce freedom to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, ² to announce the year of the favour of the LORD and the day of the vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, ³ to provide for those who grieve in Zion, to give them a splendid head-dress instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called ‘The Oaks of Righteousness, which the LORD has planted, so that He may get glory for Himself.’” ⁴ They will build up the ancient ruins. They will raise up the former devastated places. They will repair the ruined cities, which have been devastated for many generations... ⁸ “For I, the LORD, love justice. I hate robbery and injustice. I shall faithfully reward their work and I shall make an everlasting Covenant with them.”**

⁹ **Their offspring will be known among the nations and their descendants among the peoples. All who see them will recognise that they are offspring whom the LORD has blessed.**

¹⁰ **I rejoice greatly in the LORD. Let my soul shout with joy in my God! For He has clothed me with garments of salvation. He has wrapped me in a robe of righteousness, like a bridegroom who puts on a splendid head-dress, such as a priest wears and like a bride who decorates her-self with her jewels. ¹¹ For, as the ground makes its sprouts come up and, as a garden causes its seedlings to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Our text today is another of what is commonly known as Isaiah’s Servant passages. It is not about the prophet. The words may sound like the prophet is speaking about himself, but he is not. In several earlier passages, Isaiah had identified the speaker when he wrote that the Spirit of the LORD would *“rest on the Branch from the stump of Jesse.”*¹ The LORD had also promised that He would put His Spirit upon His Servant, who would bring *“justice to the nations.”*² What is being described today in our text is far beyond Isaiah. This is all about Jesus, the chosen One, filled with the Spirit and anointed by the LORD God. He is the One speaking, the One who is being sent to bring liberty and judgment.

The prophecy before us today is talking about *salvation from sin and death*. This is what the pre-incarnate Jesus says through Isaiah, **“He has sent Me to bandage up broken-hearted people, to announce freedom to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”** This captivity is not the physical or political captivity of the Old Testament nation, but the captivity of us all in sin. Since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, we are all slaves of sin. Our nature has been twisted by the fall so that we do not understand or love what is good. We cannot control ourselves but stumble into sins and do those things that we would rather not do.

Have you ever said to yourself, “Why did I do that?” Have you ever spoken a word that hurt another that you did not intend to speak? Have you ever gone ahead and done something that you promised yourself you would not do? That is a consequence of our captivity in sin. We cannot help ourselves. Paul writes about it in Romans chapter 7 when he says, *“For I do not do the good that I want to do. Instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do”* (v. 19). Even as Christians, our flesh is sold into sin. When we were unbelievers, there was no good thing in us. But even now we Christians are, when flying under our own power, helpless against sin and temptation.

The **“opening of the prison to those who are bound”** that our text speaks of is hell. That is the bondage from which Jesus has come to **announce freedom** for us. Those are the chains with which everyone who sins is bound. Jesus has come to **announce freedom**. He has come to proclaim release. However, He has come to do more than announce it, He has come to win it and deliver it to us. He has done that by taking our sins and dying our death on the cross. Then, in the preaching of forgiveness and resurrection and life, in other words, the Gospel, Jesus proclaims liberty to captives and freedom to those who are held in bondage, and **“to announce the year of the favour of the LORD.”**

The phrase **“year of the favour of the LORD”** comes from the law of the Year of Jubilee in ancient Israel. In the Year of Jubilee, every 50 years, property that had been sold reverted to its original owner, debts were forgiven, and those who had

¹ Isaiah 11:2

² Isaiah 42:1

been enslaved for their debts were released.³ Everyone who was bankrupt was forgiven. The LORD's people were given a new beginning. However, the **“year of the favour of the LORD”** *is not meant to be a specific year or time*, but the time when the LORD God finally resolves our problems and stoops down to rescue us and accepts us into His good pleasure. In other words, it is the day of our rescue and salvation. What day is that? *It is Good Friday*. That was the day that Jesus rescued us from our sins and set us free from death and hell. He set us free by taking our place, by bearing our sins, by dying under the wrath of God, and by giving us His righteousness in which to hide. Good Friday is the day of our salvation. It is the day when He said, *“It is finished!”* (John 19:30).

On the other hand, the day of our *baptism* is the day of our salvation. On that day, God called each one of us by name and claimed us personally and individually as His own. That, too, was the day that Jesus rescued us from sin and death and set us free from hell. Perhaps it sounds a bit crazy to talk about *two different days* and say that each one was that day, but it is true! We are connected through the mystical union by our baptism with the death and the resurrection of Christ, so the day of our baptism is, in a very real sense, Good Friday, the day when He took our sins and gave us life.

“The year of the favour of the LORD” is today. *Now* is the time that God is proclaiming liberty and release. If we miss His call today, there may be no other day, as the tragic and unexpected deaths reported daily on the news make so clear. *Now* our Lord calls to us to bring us out of sin and death and destruction and holds forth life everlasting! *Today*, before the final day comes and we shall be all done with this life and this world and with wrestling with sin and grace. The year of favour - the year of God's grace and favour toward us - is always today, since the death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus, because we never have a whole year to deal with, just today, just this moment. All we have is *right now*.

That is particularly important because the Servant in the prophecy does not come only to proclaim the favourable year, but also **“the day of the vengeance of our God.”** Although He chooses to focus on the grace of God, our forgiveness and acceptance by God, which theologians call the “proper work” of God, there remains that “alien work” - the work of judgment of sinful men. That day is the Judgment Day - **“the day of the vengeance of our God.”**

Why vengeance? It is not vengeance over sin committed, although we have earned it. No, Jesus has taken sin out of the way. The issue of life or death, of heaven or hell, is not decided upon the basis of the quality of our works at all, but upon faith. Jesus says, *“He who has come to faith and been baptised will be saved, but he who has not believed will be condemned”* (Mark 16:16). It is that simple. By grace one believes, while by wilful stubbornness and by rejecting God with all one's heart, one earns His vengeance.

What else could it be but vengeance? The LORD God has sent His Son into the world for us. His Son has lived a life of difficulty and temptation and poverty for us. He resisted all evil and never once sinned. He always taught the truth. He always opposed evil. He healed and loved and fed people, yet what did we do? We killed Him. It was part of His plan, but it was our sin and our captivity to sin that drove us to crucify the Lord of glory.

Nevertheless, He accepted it, humbly, patiently. He accepted the pains. He accepted the spitting in His face, the mocking, the blows of fists, and the scourging. He accepted the nails in His hands and feet. He bore our sins, and the wrath of God against our sins, on the cross. Then He died the death that we, not He, had earned. Now, He comes to proclaim to us forgiveness and the free gift of life everlasting and of resurrection from the grave.

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is on Me because the LORD has anointed Me to tell good news to poor people,” but still, some choose to ignore it. There is always something else more important to attend to than to find time to hear the good news. Some people cannot even deny themselves a couple of hours from the twisted pleasures of sin for the sake of the treasures of life and salvation. There are also those who choose not to believe, not to take this religion stuff too seriously, not to let the life and death of the very Son of God for our benefit go to their heads or change their lives or turn them from sins that they know are deadly and corrupting and evil. And sometimes, we too, stand among that crowd.

It is easy to cast a judgmental eye to those around us, to look down upon them, to see the speck in our brother's eyes without seeing the plank in our own⁴, but stop and ask yourself, how often are we perfect in our worship life? We are not. We profess faith, and we are the children of God, and yet at times, the Christian way of life becomes a chore, even boring. These truths haunt us. This is why we need a Saviour. This is why we need forgiveness.

But what about those who reject Him outright? Has God not done just as much for them also? Is it not right to call their condemnation to the flames of hell vengeance for making light of such love and such gifts and so much poured out for them which they treat as unholy and cast into the dirt and walk away from with disdain? Yes. It is holy vengeance and justice! Those who reject God and will not believe will go to hell for all eternity and receive from the hand of God what Jesus has already borne for them, what their sins deserve because they demanded to deal with it themselves by rejecting Christ and

³ Leviticus 25:8-55

⁴ Matthew 7:3

refusing to believe. It is ultimately the sin against the Holy Spirit. Jesus says, “*I tell you, human beings will be forgiven every sin and slander, but slandering the Spirit will not be forgiven*” (Matthew 12:31). To slander the Spirit is to reject the Father Himself, who has pronounced His pleasure over His only Son, upon whom the Spirit descended when He was baptised⁵. God in Christ is ready to forgive one and all. Those, however, who set themselves against and reject the one triune God - the Son, the Spirit, and the Father - will not be forgiven. But for us who believe, it is truly “**the year of the favour of the LORD!**” I mean, we’ll take it. It sounds so wonderful in the prophecy, and it is!

Comfort for “**all who mourn... for those who grieve in Zion.**” Mourning is always the word in prophecy for repentance. Forgiveness is our comfort. Our sins have been forgiven! We receive “**a splendid head-dress instead of ashes.**” The head-dress is the symbol of joy. John writes that “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). What pure joy that is!

We are anointed with “**the oil of joy instead of mourning and a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit.**” We are anointed with gladness instead of sorrow. We have security in the love of God, praise instead of fear. That is what this prophecy means: the mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting. These words speak of faith and thanksgiving instead of the depressing and oppressive fear of death and creeping certainty of the Judgment.

The prophecy also says that we shall be called “**The Oaks of Righteousness.**” The oak, or terebinth, of the ancient world, was a strong and durable deciduous tree. The Scriptures picture believers as such trees. Here they are **Oaks of Righteousness** because they find their righteousness in the Messiah, not in their own good works. The righteousness of God gives them their strength and life. This is true because God will work this righteousness in those who believe, and because it is only unbelief which fails to take sin seriously and has no interest in holiness.

All that this Servant will do, according to the prophecy, is the work of the LORD God. That also is the Gospel. God has done what we needed because we could not. He has made us part of His work of salvation because we could not save ourselves. God has done it to His own glory - and as those who receive of His grace, we are to live to give Him glory. That, too, is part of the reason we shall be called “**The Oaks of Righteousness.**”

Isaiah finishes this section with words that are not spoken by the Saviour, but by someone who has received the benefits of the Messiah’s work. Isaiah writes, “¹⁰ **I rejoice greatly in the LORD. Let my soul shout with joy in my God! For He has clothed me with garments of salvation. He has wrapped me in a robe of righteousness, like a bridegroom who puts on a splendid head-dress, such as a priest wears and like a bride who decorates herself with her jewels.** ¹¹ **For, as the ground makes its sprouts come up and, as a garden causes its seedlings to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.**” We have received the benefits. We have forgiveness and peace with the LORD God. While we have seen much of this prophecy fulfilled, not every bit of prophecy is fulfilled to the utmost yet. We still await the consummation, the return of our Lord to bring us to eternal rest. May it be so. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

O God, Shepherd of Your people, You have led Your flock in mercy throughout long years of promise. You have sustained them, and given them hope through Your Son Jesus Christ. Give us all steadfast faith in Your mercy, that we may rejoice and give thanks each passing day, and be ready for Jesus’ second coming.

In Your presence, we offer You our prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving. Forgive us our sins and wipe out our many transgressions. By Your Holy Spirit renew us with Your gracious gifts.

Open the eyes of those who are spiritually blind. Guide those who are lame and stumbling. Heal those who are diseased in their thoughts, words, and deeds. Lead all people to believe in Him whom You have sent, and to follow the things that are good, true, and lasting, and pleasing to Your Son Jesus Christ.

We pray for Your Church throughout the world. Bless all who preach and teach Your Word, that many more may come to know You as the only true God and Saviour of mankind. Rule over the hearts of all people. Guide the decisions of those in authority, and sit in the councils of the nations, that peace and justice may prevail everywhere.

Bless all who have gathered here today in Your house. Be with those of our congregation who are sick or afflicted in any way in body, mind, or spirit. Grant that in their trials they may learn of Your gracious power, and of Your readiness to help in every time of need.

⁵ Matthew 3:13-17

Pour out Your grace on us all, that we may be enabled each day to show forth the glory of Your name, and to witness to Your saving truth in Jesus Christ our Lord. Give us these things, and whatever else You know we need, in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

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1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

¹⁶ Always be joyful! ¹⁷ Pray without ceasing! ¹⁸ Give thanks in everything! For this is what God wants for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹ Do not put out the fire of the Spirit! ²⁰ Do not despise prophecies, ²¹ but test

everything! Cling to what is good! ²² Keep away from every form of evil!

²³ May the God of peace Himself make you completely holy and may your spirit, soul and body, be preserved sound and without blame when our Lord Jesus Christ comes! ²⁴ The One who calls you is faithful, and He will also do it.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶ A man came, whom God sent and whose name was John. ⁷ He came to testify, that is, to testify about the Light so that through Him everyone might believe. ⁸ He was not the Light but came to witness about the Light...

¹⁹ This is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to him, to ask him, “Who are you?”

²⁰ He confessed and did not deny. He confessed: “I am not the Christ.”

²¹ They asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.”

“Are you the Prophet?”

He answered, “No.”

²² Then they asked him, “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who have sent us. What do you say about yourself?”

²³ John said: “I am ‘a voice of one calling out in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord,”’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

²⁴ They had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, “Then why are you baptising, if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the Prophet?”

²⁶ John answered them, “I am baptising with water. There is One standing among you whom you do not know, ²⁷ the One who is coming after me. I am not worthy to untie the strap of His sandal.”

²⁸ This happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.