

12.14.08 The God We Are Waiting For Is A God of Good News

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

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I was interested to read the results this week of the 20 year study by Dr. Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler which showed that behaviors and attitudes like negativity and happiness are both contagious. The authors conclude “that emotions can pass among a network of people up to three degrees of separation away, so your joy may, to a larger extent than you realize, be determined by how cheerful your friends’ friends’ friends are, even if some of the people in this chain are total strangers to you. It may mean that an individual’s well being is the product not just of his behaviors and emotions but more of the way they feed into a larger social network. Think of it as health Facebook style.”¹ The study basically showed that emotions and behaviors bad or good, can spread like an epidemic. Music has known this for years, in the musical Annie, there is a song, “You’re never fully dressed without a smile.” There is an old Gospel song about serving Jesus with a smile that says, “Show the world a smile every day, help someone on his weary way. Show the world the joy of serving Jesus with a smile.” We are carriers of either bad news or good news.

Followers of Jesus know this already – the gospel about Jesus literally means the Good News. We are to be people of Good News. Psalm 118:24 tells us, “*This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice, and be glad in it.*” We are people of joy, gladness, and good news because we worship a God of Good News. This is what the prophet Isaiah proclaims in chapter 61:4:

“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; to proclaim the year of **the Lord’s favor**, and the **day of rescue** of our God; to **comfort** all who mourn; to **provide** for all 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. 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.”

¹ Time Magazine, December 22, 2008, page 40.

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.”

Last week we talked about how God is a God of comfort. Following up that theme, Isaiah 61:1-4 declares the mission of **God to bring good news** to the poor and oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor – a year of jubilee, the day of rescue of our God. God knows there is a suffering heart in every pew and the good news is God desires to comfort all who mourn and to change our mourning into gladness and eternal hope. There is a story in today's New York Times about how church attendance is up because when the financial news is bad and people are down, we long for some news that is good and we can find that at church.

The words of Isaiah describe a people living under the shadow of death. All of the symptoms of a funeral are listed: mourning is mentioned three times, ashes which were smeared on at times of grief, a faint or weak spirit, ruins, devastation. The people were defeated, despairing, and down. In Isaiah's time they were conquered by a foreign power. In Jesus' day, they were under Roman occupation. We know our own issues today, I don't have to spell them out.

Isaiah gives us two pictures for comparison: one person who is prepared for a funeral and one who is dressed for a wedding. The symbol of ashes, the sound of mourning, and a faint spirit are associated with a funeral. Israel suffered these symptoms because the people considered themselves as good as dead. Isaiah says

the “good news” preached by the Servant will change all that. Isaiah imagines Jerusalem, the capital city, as a woman, Dame Zion, dressed physically and emotionally for a funeral, who receives a message that an error has been made. The death notice should have been a wedding invitation. Immediately she washes the ashes from her face, puts on a little make up, and crowns her head with a garland of flowers. The ugly ashes of death have given way to a beautiful crown of life.

Something happens not only to her appearance but to the sounds she makes. Sympathetic moans and weeping are fitting for a funeral, but joyous and excited chatter precede a wedding. Instead of the scent of mourning, the woman puts on the perfumed oil of gladness that reflects her inner joy. Instead of the rough and torn sackcloth that expresses the heaviness of a soul in mourning, Dame Zion is to put on a garment or mantle of praise for her wedding dress to symbolize the emergence of a transformed character and renewed hope. She is ready to dance and to celebrate. She is now a beautiful bride dressed for her wedding, not a sad mourner heading for her own funeral.

As a pastor who has married many couples, I have seen Isaiah’s description come to life before my eyes. It is a beautiful to see the glow of joy on the face of a bride coming down the aisle. Beneath the garland of lace on her head and the garment of silk on her body, her eyes and face radiate the inner joy of the moment. At least I always hope so!

God delights in bringing this kind of transformation – turning mourning into joy like that felt by a couple on their wedding day; God exults at pouring hope, and healing into our lives.

Luke tells us God sent Jesus to make these things possible for all people.

The gospel lesson this morning from Luke 4 is about Jesus coming home to Nazareth, “*where he had been brought up.*” Imagine a young person who had been brought up in the faith at BBC who left for college and a first job, returning to BBC to visit family at Christmas time. We ask him to read the scripture in worship and he gets up and quotes Isaiah 61:1-2, “*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.*” Now you begin to understand how the members of Jesus’ home synagogue responded to him reading the passage from Isaiah and claiming that he was its fulfillment.

Jesus concluded his reading of the passage with the words, “*To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.*” The “*acceptable year of the Lord*” refers to the year of

Jubilee or the year of Liberty described in Leviticus 25:10, *“You shall hallow the 50th year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you to your property and every one of you to your family.”*

“Liberty,” which is synonymous with freedom and symbolic of salvation, is Jesus’ goal for humanity. Oswald Chambers wrote in *The Moral Foundations of Life*, “The Spirit of God is always the spirit of liberty; the spirit that is not of God is the spirit of bondage, the spirit of oppression and depression. The spirit of God convicts vividly and tersely, but He is always the Spirit of liberty. **God who made the birds never made birdcages; it is men who make birdcages, and after a while we become cramped and can do nothing but chirp and stand on one leg.** When we get out into God’s great free life, we discover that that is the way God meant us to live ‘the glorious liberty of the children of God.’”

What prevents us from living in the “glorious liberty of the children of God”? We might be able to come up with a long list of reasons and excuses and justifications for our unhappiness, our spiritual bondage, but Thomas Merton challenges us with these words from *New Seeds of Contemplation*: *“It is not that someone else is preventing you from living happily; you yourself do not know what you want. Rather than admit this, you prefer that someone is keeping you from exercising your liberty. Who is this? **It is you yourself.**”*

Jesus comes to his own synagogue and reads from his people’s book, *“Isaiah 61, one of my favorites,”* and then he tells two Bible stories that everyone knew. In the days of the prophet Elijah there was a lot of famine in Israel,

“Yeah times were tough.” And who was it that received the blessing of God?

A Lebanese woman. *“Well, yeah that’s true.”*

In the days of the prophet Elisha there were a lot of lepers in Israel.

“There were, so many, it was terrible.”

And who was it that received the blessing of God?”

A Syrian soldier. *“Well, yeah that’s true.”* Next line in the gospel - **kill preacher.**

Why? Because he read to them their scriptures and told them their stories that reveal **that God’s good news is for all people**, even people we may not like or be comfortable with or even consider our enemies. That is why they drove Jesus out of town. It can be dangerous preaching God’s good news. A church note in The New

Forest Magazine in England said, *“In the future the preacher for next Sunday will be found hanging on the notice board.”*

As followers of Jesus, once we have heard the good news Jesus brings, once we have had our broken hearts comforted, once we have been set free from the captivity of our sin, we are called to be oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to **display God’s glory**. Our mission is to build up the ruins and devastation of many generations; we are to be the repairers of communities. This is one of the best ways we share our faith and the good news of God – by not being shaken like grass in difficult times but by pitching in to help where we can to build up our communities

Isaiah describes the people of Israel as *“trees of righteousness.”* In several instances, Isaiah refers to the image of trees in the forest of Lebanon. Isaiah 14:8 says the trees of Lebanon will joyously herald the march of the children of Israel as they return home from exile, and the trees will provide the finest wood in the world to beautify the floors of the restored temple where the Spirit of God will walk (60:13). The trees symbolize the beauty of a redeemed people and reveal the secret of their joy – that righteousness is not of their making. Isaiah says the trees of righteousness are *“the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.”*

Jesus gave his life, being crucified on a tree, a tree that became the ultimate tree of righteousness upon which our sins were forgiven and human beings were set free. God longs to set all who are captive, free.

As the body of Christ, the church is called to help God set other people free. We are to carry on Jesus’ ministry of bringing good news in the midst of the bad; liberation from the idols, demons and addictions that oppress us and hold us captive; healing for the brokenhearted; and comfort for all who mourn. We are called to “infect” other people with the good news that Jesus has come, full of the Spirit, to deliver us and to celebrate with us.

As we gaze at a Christmas tree in these coming days may we remember that we are called by God to be trees of righteousness to display the Lord’s glory to those around us.

May we remember the tree upon which Jesus died to save us.

In Christ the ugly ashes of death have given way to a beautiful crown of life. That is why the Apostle Paul could say as he faced death, (2 Timothy 4), *“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord,*

the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

What are we going to do with those crowns? We will cast them in worship before God in heaven (Revelation 4:10-11), *“They cast their crowns before the throne, singing, ‘You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.’”*

The good news we anticipate and celebrate as we approach Christmas is that in Jesus, God can turn our despair into joy and the ashes of death into a crown of everlasting life.

Blessing Romans 12:9-12a

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

Love one another with mutual affection;

Outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope

Be people who live and share the good news of Jesus Christ.