

3 Advent, Yr. B

December 13, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28

A few minutes ago, we heard the collect: stir up your power, O Lord. You may know that, because of that collect, this Sunday is sometimes called Stir-up Sunday. We had a discussion about that when we were doing the Advent bags, because of the wonderful Christmas puddings Carol was “stirring up.”

This Sunday is also called Gaudete Sunday, Gaudete being Latin for “rejoice” because of the theme of rejoicing that appears in Isaiah, in the psalm and certainly in Thessalonians. There’s a bit of lightening of mood, represented by the rose candle instead of another purple one in the Advent wreath.

Both of these themes fit the Isaiah reading – his picture of the new creation, of God clothing us with the garments of salvation, is surely cause for rejoicing. But before we get there, there will certainly have to be a lot of stirring up!

We talked earlier about Isaiah writing to the exiles, who are now returning to Israel. This generation had never lived in Israel and even though they had heard stories of its destruction, one wonders at their reaction when they saw how devastated everything was and they must have felt overwhelmed at the task of rebuilding. But then come those words of Isaiah – They will have a garland instead of ashes, gladness instead of mourning, they will build up the ruins, repair the ruined cities. God will make an everlasting covenant with them and they will be known as a people the Lord has blessed. This covenant – they have a part to play and I think their part is being described in the first part of the passage – it’s Isaiah speaking because the spirit of the Lord is upon him and he describes his vocation, but it’s theirs as well:

He is to bring good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

This scripture appears again, in the New Testament, this time on the lips of Jesus, in his inaugural sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth. You'll remember he quotes this from Isaiah and then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled." In other words, I have been anointed and sent by the Spirit of God to do these things. This is the game plan, this is my job description. I'm going to proclaim that good news of salvation to those who haven't heard it, to those who rarely hear good news of any kind, to those who think they don't matter. And then I'm going to SHOW them what that looks like by healing the broken-hearted, by freeing those imprisoned – in whatever way: maybe they are imprisoned by illness or poverty or maybe, just as effectively, by emotional or mental illness, or maybe even more effectively, by some spiritual illness. My task is to comfort those who suffer, to alleviate suffering whenever possible, and to walk through it with those who must endure it.

Now, if that were only a reading in Isaiah, we might be able to simply relegate it to that time and place. Maybe study it and talk about its context and, in effect, kind of forget about it. But because we are followers of Christ and because he chose this scripture as the one that defined his life, it becomes the same for us. That life of healing, loving, reconciliation, compassion, hope, justice – all that was his path and therefore, it's ours as well.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, this is a vision of the peaceable kingdom. In the New Testament, it is known as the Kingdom of God. It's a picture of what God wills. It's a picture of salvation. We've talked before about what we mean by salvation. I think I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, that N.T. Wright thinks that most Christians, when asked what they

think salvation is about will respond by saying, “going to heaven.” But here salvation is pictured differently. It’s a picture of human flourishing. EACH and EVERY human, fully alive, here and now. Each person is to have whatever they need to become the person God intended them to be. All the obstacles to that are to be removed. One line I would point out especially is the line about the year of the Lord’s favor. This refers to what was known as the Jubilee Year: once every 50 years, all debts were forgiven, all slaves were freed, all land reverted to its original owner. Even the land was “freed” in that it was allowed to lie fallow for that year. The idea behind all of this was the idea of the formation of an egalitarian community. Everyone has a fresh start, everyone has a seat at the table, everyone is heard, everyone matters, everyone has enough, everyone, in short, flourishes. That’s God’s vision for humanity. There’s a proverb that says that without a vision, they people will perish. So, God has a vision, but we need one as well. We’re invited to adopt that vision of God, but we hear the voice of the world, as well. And they say opposite things.

Here’s an articulation of that choice:

For countless centuries, humanity has chosen to walk the war path, using conquest, domination and oppression as our chosen methods for organizing society. On this road, we assume we are separate from each other, using our difference as opportunities to set one above the other. This core belief leads to a whole set of attitudes: arrogance, greed, polarization, aggression, coercion...The game is power of one over another, resulting in endless and escalating cycles of war.

We have been so accustomed to the scenario of power and violence that we accept it as natural, failing to realize that there is another way. We have built the war path into such a broad network of

superhighways that we can barely see through the dust and haze to the other road that has been there all along – the peace path.

On the peace path, the world looks very different. Here the basic assumption is our connectedness. With this as our central truth, we develop ways of being together that are about cooperation, partnership, respect, dialogue and non-violence or love-in-action. Here the game is right relationship. (Louise Diamond)

At the lectionary meeting, a point was made about framing. The way we construct the frame determines what we are going to see. Sometimes we frame things in a way that limit possibilities for new ideas. What this scripture from Isaiah is asking us to do, I think, is to broaden our frame, to enlarge our vision. In effect, to take on the mind of God, to see as God sees.

That's part of what's going on in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. They are worried and anxious that Jesus hasn't yet returned and that some of their friends and family have died without seeing him. They have a vision that's pretty narrow. Paul broadens that out: yes, some have died, but God has conquered death and because of that, all will be raised. In fact, because of that and because God is faithful, you can rejoice, you can even continue to give thanks in circumstances that are difficult and painful because there's more here than meets the eye. It's not just a matter of "what you see is all there is." You can trust that God is working his purpose out and that all works for good for those who love him.

The challenge for us is to look at our own framing: how do we see God? How do we see the world? How do we see our fellow humans? I recently read an article by a sociologist who was writing about resentment. He pointed out that that is a crucial problem for our time: that social status and the resentment people feel when they find

themselves slipping down the social status ladder are real and, in a rapidly changing world and economy, many people are feeling that they are losing out and resentment is their response. Here again are competing visions: is it a dog-eat-dog world like the one Thomas Hobbes wrote about in the 16th century, where fierce competition for resources means that it's a war of all against all? Or is the beloved community, the peaceable kingdom laid out by Isaiah and implemented by Jesus a real possibility? Which is our vision?

When I was preparing this sermon, Carol Ann sent me something her daughter had sent to her. It has to do with the South African concept of Ubuntu which recognizes that we are connected and that we need each other. Here's what she sent:

In certain regions of South Africa, when someone does something wrong, he is taken to the center of the village and surrounded by his tribe for two days while they speak of all the good he has done. They believe each person is good, yet sometimes we make mistakes, which is really a cry for help. They unite in this ritual to encourage the person to reconnect with his true nature. The belief is that unity and affirmation have more power to change behavior than shame and punishment. This is known as Ubuntu – humanity towards others.

The core belief, the vision – that each person is good. To expand that: that each person matters, that each person's flourishing is a concern for all of us, that we are here to construct that beloved community, that salvation is not something to be put off until after death, but is something that we construct, together, here and now, as we follow the Christ from whom we take our name. Amen.