

Advent 03 B 2014
December 14, 2014 :: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11
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Proclaiming the Lord's Favor

If our reading from Isaiah sounds at all familiar, it's probably because of this: The Gospel of Luke records that Jesus delivered his first public sermon in a synagogue, in his hometown of Nazareth. According to Luke, Jesus began by reading these first few verses from Isaiah 61:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

And then, according to Luke, Jesus sat down and offered one of the shortest sermons on record, when he said:

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Now, even though most of us can remember hearing about Jesus' first sermon, most of us probably cannot remember hearing these words from Isaiah in their larger context, and that's what I want to do this morning.

However, trying to preach on our reading from Isaiah reminds me of the story about the pastor and the children's sermon.

One Sunday morning, the pastor says to the children, who have gathered in front of the altar rail, “Well, boys and girls, what has a bushy tail and runs around

in trees?” Nobody said a word. The pastor waits a bit, then says, “You know, it gathers nuts, and stores them in holes in trees.” The pastor waits. “Doesn’t anybody know?” Again, a long silence.

The pastor sighs, and says, “Help me out, boys and girls; surely someone knows what animal I’m talking about.”

After another awkward silence, one little boy slowly raises his hand. The pastor, relieved that someone is finally going to respond, smiles and says, “Yes, Billy?”

Billy swallows hard and says, “Well, pastor, we all know that what you’re describing *sounds* like a squirrel; but since this is church, we also know that it’ll probably turn out to be Jesus.”

The fact is, it’s hard to hear this text from Isaiah— and especially those first few verses— without also seeing, in our mind’s eye, an image of Jesus standing in the synagogue in his hometown, reading this text, and then offering that brief sermon.

However, anyone who’s ever really studied this passage from Isaiah, knows that we don’t actually know who the prophet had in mind as the speaker— we don’t know who it was who originally said: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Isaiah might have had in mind a political Messiah like Cyrus, the king of Persia; or it might have been a member of the small group of Jews who had returned to Israel from exile in Babylon; or, he might even have had himself in mind as the speaker. We just don’t know.

But, since this is church, *we* immediately think of Jesus. And, like those children listening to their pastor, we are both wrong and right in that assumption. We are wrong if we think that the reading from Isaiah is only, or

even mostly, about Jesus. But we are right if we think it has *something to do* with Jesus ... and us.

Even though we don't know who the speaker was exactly, we can be pretty confident that this text was being addressed to a group of Jewish people, who have returned to Jerusalem after many years of exile. And what they've discovered is Jerusalem in ruins, and their lives, instead of getting better, now seem to be getting worse. And this text calls upon those people to do two things. First, they are to proclaim "the year of the Lord's favor." And, second, they are to give thanks to God, for that year of favor, *even before it happens*.

Now, as an aside, most scholars agree that the phrase "the year of the Lord's favor" refers to what was known as a Jubilee Year. A Jubilee Year took place every 49 or 50 years, and during that year all debts were cancelled, and land that had been seized, because its owner was unable to repay a debt, was returned to its original owners. It sounds like a pretty good, and just, deal. And it was!

So, this person, who is sent by God, is to proclaim that a Jubilee Year is coming, and then invite all the down-hearted and discouraged people to give thanks and praise to God. But here's the thing: They're not to thanking and praising God for something he *has already done* for them, but rather for something that God *is going to do* for them at some undisclosed time in the future. In other words, they are to give thanks even *before* they have anything for which to be thankful.

And that brings me to the Season of Advent. A lot of what this season is about is waiting; waiting for God to do something. And as we move through the season, we're reminded of our religious forebears, who lived 2,000 years ago, who were waiting for God to send them a Messiah. But we're also reminded that we, today, are still waiting for the return of that same Messiah— for the return of Jesus— to finally set things right with the world. In other words, in Advent, we're waiting for God to do something.

I would submit to you that these words, recorded by Isaiah for people who lived some 2500 years ago, are written to us as well. Because we are not so different from those ancient Jews, who have returned home from exile only to find their country, and their lives, in disarray; for the world in which we live today is likewise out of sorts. And yet, Isaiah is calling upon us to do a few things.

First, to proclaim a Jubilee Year. And then, second, to live as if we actually believe what we're proclaiming. And, third, to go ahead and give thanks and praise to God for this Good News.

No, God's work is not done— and, to look around, it might seem as if he's yet to start— but by faith we are proclaiming a confidence that God will prove true to his word.

So, remember what Isaiah has said to us: in a messed-up world, we are called to proclaim, and live out, the year of the Lord's favor. And just as Jesus claimed this text for himself, and for his ministry, we are called to do the same.

Perhaps this is part of that “cross” which Jesus called us to take up when he invited us to follow him— the cross of proclaiming God's preference for those whom the world despises.

And so, I hope you'll take some time this week to think about these two questions:

First, “Who is despised in the world today?”

And, second, “What can I do to *proclaim* God's love for them, and then *demonstrate* God's preference for them?”

For this is something which the Season of Advent calls us to do; and not just during Advent, but also throughout the year. Amen.