

Third Sunday in Advent
December 15, 2002

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

The Messiah Comes Proclaiming Good News

1. Good News of Liberty
2. Good News of Joy

Isaiah 61:1-3,10-11

Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for 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 and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor...10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Dear Friends in Christ,

"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Who's speaking here? Is it the prophet Isaiah? Given the fact that these words occur in the 61st chapter of Isaiah's prophecy, I suppose that would be a safe guess. But if you open your Bible to Luke 4 you find there that when Jesus returned to Nazareth, the town where he'd been brought up, when he was asked to read the scriptures in the synagogue service, he read these verses from Isaiah 61 and then announced, "**Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.**" (Lk. 4:21)

The words we have before us in today's Old Testament lesson were written by the prophet Isaiah more than seven centuries before the birth of Jesus. But, based on what Jesus said at Nazareth, when Isaiah wrote, Jesus was speaking through him. This prophecy explains why we give Jesus the title Christ. (Christ is the Greek form of the word; in Hebrew it's Messiah.) Both Christ and Messiah mean "the anointed one." Here the Messiah declares that he was anointed not with oil but with the Holy Spirit. And there was a reason for his anointing. By this anointing, the human nature of Jesus was endowed with divine attributes. This anointing not only signaled that Jesus had been set apart to be our Prophet,

Priest, and King, but it also indicated that he had been sent by God on a mission. Jesus summarizes that mission when he says here that he has been anointed by the LORD “to preach good news to the poor.” We’ll see this morning that Jesus not only proclaims the good news, he creates the good news. His birth, life, death, and resurrection are the good news. It’s good news of liberty, Jesus tells us, first of all. And word of the liberty Jesus has won for us makes this 2] good news of joy.

1. Good News of Liberty

Centuries before his incarnation, the Messiah speaks through Isaiah and says, *“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”* The Savior uses some vivid language to describe his mission. He speaks of the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives and prisoners. When he speaks of “release from darkness” for the prisoners, it says literally “opening of the eyes for the prisoners.” Picture a man who has been held captive in a dark dungeon for years. Then one day he’s brought out into the bright light of day. He blinks and covers his eyes as he adapts to the brilliance of the sun. More than a century after Isaiah wrote these words, the Jews living in exile in Babylon would find comfort in them. Now it’s true that most of them weren’t held in prisons or even in prison camps in Babylon. They did as the LORD had advised them through the prophet Jeremiah. They built houses and settled down. They married and had sons and daughters. They sought the peace and prosperity of the city to which they had been carried into exile. Yet despite all that, the exile was still hard on believers. Some of them, as the psalm says, sat and wept as they remembered Zion, the city of God, the place where the temple of the LORD now lay in ruins. Whatever pleasantries the life in Babylon afforded them could not replace the sorrow of being exiled. But Isaiah has good news to proclaim: *“(The LORD) has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”* One day this exile is going to end.

When the Messiah says here that he has come “to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,” he is borrowing the language of the book of Leviticus. There Moses relays to the Israelites the LORD’s instructions for something called “the year of Jubilee.” What the LORD told Israel was that in every 50th anniversary year since they entered the Promised Land was to be a jubilee, that is, a year-long celebration. During that year all debts were to be forgiven, all land was to be returned to the family that originally owned it, and all slaves were to be released. These provisions were a way to ensure that Israel would never have a permanent underclass. At the beginning of the year of jubilee they were to sound a trumpet and “proclaim liberty throughout the land.” The blast of the trumpet said, “You are free. You have liberty from landlessness, from debt, and from slavery.” We actually have no indication that the provisions of the year of jubilee were ever instituted in Israel. It’s likely that they always remained an ideal. But

when Jesus came, he did proclaim liberty. He announced the year of the LORD's favor, that he had come to set us free.

I suppose all this can be a bit puzzling for people who've never known anything but liberty. Here in America we might argue about whether we're "one nation under God," but not very many attempt to argue with the concept of "liberty and justice for all." Why, this is the land where Patrick Henry once cried, "Give me liberty or give me death." And I think the citizens of New Hampshire still have on their license plates, "Live free or die." This is the land of the free. We might almost be tempted to paraphrase the Jews in John 8 when they said to Jesus, **"We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"** (John 8:33) Maybe all this talk of liberty doesn't resonate with people like us who've never known anything else. But, as Jesus made clear to the Jews, the freedom he's referring to is a freedom from sin. **"Everyone who sins is a slave to sin,"** Jesus said. Does that sound right? Maybe that drug addict with his steal-from-his-own-mother kind of craving is a slave. Maybe that career criminal with a rap sheet as long as his arm is a slave, but am I a slave to sin? In my sinful nature, I am. Listen to the apostle Paul: **"When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ..I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of sin at work within my members."** (Rom. 7:21-22) That's why we have the desire to do what is good, but can't carry it out. That's why we do what we don't want to do, why we do what we hate. This is how Martin Luther put it in one of his hymns: ***Fast bound in Satan's chains I lay; Death brooded darkly o'er me. Sin was my torment night and day; In sin my mother bore me. Yet deep and deeper still I fell; Life had become a living hell, So firmly sin possessed me.*** (CW 377)

But let me tell you, until you've come to the conviction that aside from Christ you're a slave to sin and doomed to hell, the advent of the Messiah will never arouse more than mild curiosity in you. It's when you know how desperately you needed him that his announcement of the year of the LORD's favor lifts your spirit from mourning and despair to gladness and praise. A man who knows he's hopelessly in debt, who thinks every waking minute of his inability to pay that debt, reacts with joy at hearing that his entire debt has been canceled. A woman who has spent her life working under the oppressive rule of a cruel mistress knows what it is to be granted her freedom. This is us. We were the poor, brokenhearted captives, enslaved by sin and bound in chains. But the righteous life of Jesus and his innocent death brought an end to our captivity. Through faith in him we have true freedom. **"If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."** (John 8:36) This is the good news that Jesus was anointed by the LORD to proclaim. It's good news of liberty.

Makeovers are all the rage these days. I read in the paper that there was a television show recently called "The Ultimate Makeover." Apparently people applied to be made over, to have their appearance re-done from head to toe. As

I read these opening words of Isaiah 61, I think Jesus might be behind the *ultimate* makeover. Here in the “before” picture we have a brokenhearted captive covered with ashes, mourning in the depths of despair. But then comes Jesus with the good news of who he is and what he’s done and you have suddenly a leaping, laughing ex-prisoner clothed in the garments of praise, anointed with the oil of gladness, and turbaned with a crown of beauty. This leaping, laughing, joyful person is us, too, through faith in Jesus. The effect of the good news of liberty is joy.

2. Good News of Joy

We have a different speaker in verse 10 of Isaiah 61. No longer is it the Messiah speaking through Isaiah. Now it’s the believer in Christ speaking: *“I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.”* You may have noticed that this morning, on the third Sunday of Advent, we have lit the pink candle on our Advent wreath. Now there are probably almost as many explanations of the Advent wreath as there are Advent wreaths. But one consistent explanation of the meaning of the pink candle is that the pink symbolizes joy—and joy is a big part of the message on this third Sunday of Advent.

Isaiah pens a picture of joy here. He depicts a man and a woman on their wedding day. The bridegroom has adorned his head like a priest, that is, he’s wearing turban. And the bride has adorned herself with her jewels. In this picture of a bridal couple in ancient Israel, both bride and groom are fully decked out for this happiest day of their lives. But Isaiah isn’t talking about a wedding. He’s talking about being as happy as we were on our wedding day. Our epistle reading today also conveys this note of joy when it says at the beginning, **“Be joyful always.”**

There are times in our lives when we’re tempted to respond to words like these by saying, “Now there’s a pipedream: Joyful *a/ways!* Anybody who’s lived for more than a few years has experienced how life can beat you down. It doesn’t even have to be the big hurts. Just the steady drumbeat of losses, reversals, and heartaches can snatch the joy from your life. Christmas joy? With these debts? With this pain? With the losses I’ve suffered the past few years? Surely you jest!”

But I don’t think Paul or Isaiah are jesting. Both of them knew sorrow and pain and opposition. But both of them also insist that joyfulness is the normal state of a Christian. It’s easy to forget that—or at least easy to live as if we’ve forgotten that. That’s because our Old Adam isn’t happy unless there’s some sin on the horizon. Have you ever heard someone say, “She always has a smile on her face”? Or, “He’s always so upbeat, never seems to have a down day.” What those comments say to me is that joyfulness is unusual enough that it’s worth noting when we see it in others. Satan would like us to believe that we lead lives of relentless gloom. Sometimes he appears to have succeeded. We can be

awash in a sea of blessings and still find something that drains the joy from our faces, something to stew over and grumble about.

So what's the solution? Listen to Isaiah. He says, "*I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.*" The LORD is the source of our joy. God infuses us with joy. "*For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness.*" Joy will never be far from me—even in the worst of circumstances—as long as I'm able to remember that I was once brokenhearted captive, mourning the ruin of my soul in tears and ashes, but the LORD's anointing of Jesus as the Christ to win my freedom and proclaim that freedom to me has given me a perpetual reason for joy.

Even now through faith in Christ the year of jubilee has been instituted. And it's not just a year. The good news the Messiah proclaims is that we've been freed from the fearful debt of sin, liberated from the yoke of Satan's slavery, and that by God's grace we're headed for our heavenly home. Good news like this produces lasting joy. Amen.