

Third Sunday of the Epiphany
January 21, 2007
Isaiah 61:1-6

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Meet the Messiah

1. Hear his good news
2. Rejoice in your transformation
3. Serve for his glory

^{NIV} 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.⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.⁵ Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.⁶ And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.

Dear Friends in Christ

In today's Gospel (Luke 4: 14-21) the people of Jesus' hometown of Nazareth had a chance to hear him speak in their synagogue. When the young rabbi stood to read the Scriptures at the Sabbath service, he read from Isaiah 61, today's Old Testament lesson. Then Jesus sat down and, with the eyes of everyone in the synagogue fastened on him, said something of monumental significance: **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."** Now Isaiah 61 is a prophecy of the coming of the Anointed One, the Messiah, and a description of his mission. When Jesus says that this Scripture is fulfilled *today* it is the same thing as introducing himself to the people of Nazareth as the long-expected Messiah.

But I'm not sure they understood him. Their initial reaction was to comment on the gracious words that fell from his lips and to ask, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" And later, when Jesus had predicted that he wouldn't be received as the Messiah in his hometown, the fine citizens of Nazareth made his prediction come true by driving the hometown boy out of his hometown and attempting to throw him off a nearby cliff.

Jesus is still introducing himself as the Messiah. Here today he does so through this passage from Isaiah 61. For us who have already met Jesus these words are an opportunity to know him even better. At today's "meet and greet" for Jesus the Messiah we (1) hear the good news he brings, (2) we are encouraged to rejoice in the transformation that he effects in those who believe the good news, and (3) we are called to serve for the Messiah's glory.

1. Hear his good news

As we begin to examine these passages it will be important to remember that the second part of Isaiah (40-66) was written as a book of comfort for Jewish exiles in Babylon. Here the Messiah is speaking through Isaiah to comfort the exiles with the good news of his coming: *"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, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God..."* Poor, brokenhearted captives. That's an accurate description of many of the Jews who'd been forcibly relocated to Babylon. They'd left practically everything behind in Judah. They'd lost (or last track of) friends and relatives. Though they weren't confined to prisons or labor camps, neither were they free to go where they pleased.

But what do these passages say to us? Most of us aren't poor. Most of us aren't brokenhearted, at least not this morning. None of us are captives of a foreign government. But look again. There is a sense in which we're poor. We don't have anything close to what it would take to square our account with God. We're *poor*, miserable sinners. We've got nothing with which to buy our redemption. Broken-hearted fits too. God's law breaks our hearts by bringing our sins to light and afflicting our consciences. There are times when we feel all torn up inside at just the memory of some sin we committed—the recurring sense of shame at how that disobedience hurt other people, the recognition that such behavior was a cold and ungrateful way to treat the Savior who loves us. The Bible says the broken heart is a sacrifice

in which God delights. (Ps. 51:17) And “captives”? Can you think of a better way to describe people who have to say with the apostle Paul, **“In the sinful nature (I am) a slave to the law of sin”**? (Rom. 7:25)

But the Messiah has come precisely for people like us. That’s why the news he brings is so good. Gracious words fall from his lips. He tells us that through God’s generosity, we are now rich. Jesus laid aside the glory of heaven to become a humble servant, to live and die in our place. Jesus suffered the heartbreak of rejection and condemnation in order to rise from death and bind up our broken hearts with good news of forgiveness. Jesus became the captive of sinful men to free us from the shackles of sin and death. Yes, we are living in the year of the LORD’s favor. Jesus has come to make all things right, avenging the wrongs of those who reject him but bestowing blessings on those who trust him as the LORD’s Anointed One. It’s good news for poor, brokenhearted captives.

Come to think of it, that probably isn’t a good way to describe us anymore—poor, brokenhearted captives. As believers in Jesus Christ we daily reap the benefits of the glorious transformation that the Spirit of the LORD has effected in us.

2. Rejoice in your transformation

Before-and-after pictures are the stock in trade of all kinds of purveyors of physical improvement. “She used to look like this, but after a few weeks on our weight loss formula, look how svelte she is.” “He used to look like this, but once he started using our exercise equipment—well, just look at him.” The airwaves are blanketed with infomercials extolling the virtues of numerous skin care products. But we’re a pretty skeptical crowd. We know you can hold your gut in for the camera. We know photos can be retouched. We know that most of these things aren’t all they’re cracked up to be.

But try this out for a before-and-after picture: A woman is sitting on the ground in an uncomfortable heap. Her clothes are torn. Her hair is disheveled. In fact, it’s more than disheveled. It looks as though someone has poured soot over her head. And someone has: she did it to herself. Cut into the soot on her face are the tracks of her tears. It’s a picture of utter despair.

But now move to the “after” picture. The same woman has risen from the ground. She’s washed and cleansed and beautifully dressed. Instead of ashes in her hair, there’s a beautiful crown on her head.

There's the fragrance of the scented oil with which she's been anointed. Her grief has turned to joy. She's been gloriously transformed.

What you've just seen is not some hokey, shady before-and-after picture, but a picture of the glorious transformation that takes place when sorrowing sinners place their trust in Jesus the Messiah. *"The Spirit of the LORD is on me...to comfort all who mourn, 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 despair."* God hasn't left us to sit in our lonely, self-inflicted misery. He comforts us with the coming of our King, the Messiah. Grief can't remain dominant where the joy of forgiveness and eternal life in Christ has taken root. Earlier in his book Isaiah had written, **"Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."** (12:6) Sorrow and grief can't overwhelm us anymore because the Messiah has come and transformed us with his good news.

So we've heard the good news. We've seen the dramatic transformation. Now the question is "Why?" Why did God do all this for us? The answer is here in verse 3: *"They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor,"* literally, "that he may be glorified." The remainder of this section describes not the work of the Messiah, but the work of those people who have been transformed by the good news Messiah proclaims. Our work is to serve for God's glory.

3. Serve for his glory

Earlier Isaiah had written, **"All men are like grass."** (40:6) It was a fitting description of the brevity and frailty of human life. Elsewhere the Bible says that we **"are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes."** (James 4:14) But here Isaiah writes, *"They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor."* What turned here-today-gone-tomorrow grass and into a mighty oak trees? God's favor did it, his grace in the Messiah Jesus Christ. In him we find strength and endurance.

"Oaks" isn't the prophet's only name for us. A few verses later he writes, *"And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God."* Think about how surprising that would have sounded to Jewish ears. In Old Testament times only the descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses, could serve as priests. The work and even the wardrobe of these priests was carefully laid out in the law of

Moses. The priests stood between the people of Israel and the LORD God. They brought sacrifices on the people's behalf and prayed for the people. They taught the people the law of God and blessed the people in the LORD's name. To set the priests apart and to underscore the dignity of their office, the LORD laid out exactly how the priests were to dress. Along with a tunic and a robe with a sash, they wore a colorful linen ephod made from gold, blue, purple and scarlet yarn. (An ephod was something like a sleeveless waistcoat.) On each shoulder of the ephod an onyx stone was fastened. One stone was engraved with the names of six of the tribes of Israel, the other stone with the names of the other six tribes of Israel. On his head the priest wore a linen turban. Attached to the front of the turban was a gold plate and on it were engraved the words HOLY TO THE LORD. Needless to say, only properly consecrated priests got to wear such garments. You didn't function as a priest unless you had the right lineage and a call from God.

But here the Messiah sees a day coming in which all God's people will be priests. That day is now—the time when the Messiah has come and completed his work. Being priests means we can come boldly into the presence of God to seek his mercy. That means that each of us can be an intercessor for fellow Christians, taking their needs to God in prayer. There are no distinctive garments prescribed for New Testament priests like us. You may be wearing scrubs or Levis or the prescribed uniform of your company with your name sewn over the front pocket; you may wear a tie or a badge or a business suit, but as a believer in Jesus you are still a priest. You were consecrated for this when you were baptized and put on the righteousness of Jesus Christ. At work, at home, in school, and even on your days off or in retirement, God has made you a priest so that you can use the spiritual gifts he's given you for the common good and for the display of God's splendor. Just as the Jews who returned from exile set about the work of rebuilding the ruins of Jerusalem, so it's our work to build up the New Testament Jerusalem, the Christian Church. In fact, in whatever you do your aim is to do it to the glory of God. It's our grateful response to the good news of forgiveness and the wonderful transformation the Messiah has brought about in us.

Have you met anyone significant lately? Someone powerful or famous or maybe semi-famous? Most of us would have to say no. But we'll never meet anyone more important than the Messiah we meet here in Isaiah 61. May God enable us to see him as more than a man who speaks nicely or says nice things! He is the Anointed One of God. His mission was to preach the good news of forgiveness and peace with

God, the good news that has turned our mourning into rejoicing. Through faith in him we are oaks of righteousness and priests of God, whose mission it is to glorify God in all we do. Yes, I think you could say that each of us has met someone significant. We've met the Messiah. Amen.