

Advent 3: Joy

December 11, 2005

Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

This passage is from “third” Isaiah, chapters 56 through 66, and so is written at the time of the restoration of the Jews exiled to Babylon who were now allowed to return to Jerusalem.

Verses 1-4 are the passage read by Jesus at the outset of his ministry – see Luke 4:18-19.

Note two crucial and recurring theme in scriptures: 1) a blessing is given in order to be a blessing to others (in this case the blessing of “the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me” is given in order to pronounce good news to the oppressed); and 2) God sees and responds to the oppressed, the broken hearted, the captives, prisoners, and mourners with good news, healing, liberty, release, favour and comfort, because as verse 8 plainly says, “I, the Lord, love justice.”

Note in verses 8 and 9 the reference to an everlasting covenant. This reminds we Christians to remember that we are still called to acknowledge that Jews have been and continue to be “a people whom the Lord has blessed.”

Verses 10-11 switch from the voice of the Lord to the voice of the prophet. The image of the bride groom and bride are ones that the church has used to describe the relationship of love, joy, intimacy and bond between Christ and ourselves.

Verse 11 uses the organic image of the garden to describe how natural and embedded in the order of creation is God’s righteousness and praise.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

It is important to remember that there are two people named John in the Second Testament: John the Baptizer, and John the disciple of Jesus after whom this Gospel is named.

The writer of the Gospel according to John is not so much interested in telling us about what Jesus said and did; he wants us to **see** who Jesus **is**. John wants us to see beneath the easy to observe outward actions to the hidden inner true meaning. Notice how many times the word “light” and “enlighten” are used in only two verses, 7 and 8; and that the key question in verses 19 to 28 is “Who are you?”

When John the Baptizer says in verse 26, “Among you stands one whom you do not know,” he states a truth – we do not truly **know** who Jesus is – that the rest of the Gospel will try to make plain to us. This verse needs to be read not as an accusation against the obstinacy of the Pharisees, but as an objective statement about us: **we** do not know who Jesus is; **we** have not seen the light; and it is of vital importance that we see this light and come to know who Jesus really is.

Sermon Thoughts (Not the sermon)

I have said earlier that it is crucial for our salvation that we know what is the work of God, and what is our work; and that we don't get these two things mixed up – expecting God to do what we must do, or, trying to do what God must do.

One key distinction between what is our work, and what is God's work is that it is our work to prepare for God's presence, to be open to God, to trust God, to receive God presence, to respond to God's blessing, and to accept the charge that God gives; but it is God's work to provide both the seed and the fruitfulness.

The seed which God provides is both the purpose and the process for life.

We live in a world, and have been born with bodies, hearts and minds that are designed to live. This is given by God. But the world – and we – are also designed in a way that abundant life only comes by living a certain way. This too is built into the fabric of the universe by God. And the bible, and particularly the life, teachings and death and resurrection of Jesus, reveal what that fabric is: God loves justice. (And also steadfastness, kindness, etc.)

It is crucial to understand that the purpose and process that God provides are both organic, natural, and unavoidably built into the universe. They are not rewards for good behaviour. But like a gardener, if we provide good soil and care, the plants have built into them the “desire” to grow and produce fruit.

In the same way, this Advent season is a time for us to wake up and see the light. It is time for us to do what is our work: to prepare the soil of our souls, so that the seed of God's word can take root in us and put down deep and strong roots. It is **not** our work to provide the fruit.

We live in a time when people are hyper-focused on “making a difference” and producing “outcomes.” We are often fearful about the future of congregations, but the scriptures are clear: it is not our work to grow. The cycle of growth is already built in by God and God will provide the fruitfulness. Our work is to be healthy soil.