

December 17, 2017
Third Sunday in Advent

“Being Found Needy”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

I want you to remember the biblical reference to our Old Testament lesson today. Isaiah 61. Isaiah 61. Whenever you happen to be discussing the Bible with somebody and they make the very common but very uninformed comment something along the lines of, “Why is God so mean in the Old Testament, I like the New Testament better,” respond with “Ever read Isaiah 61?”

I mean look at it. It is Messianic and it is nothing but good news! These are the words of God’s anointed one, Isaiah’s servant of the Lord whom we know to be Christ Jesus! And what is He promising? Good news to the poor, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to captives, freedom to the bound, the year of the Lord’s favor! This is 100 percent sweet Gospel, smack dab in the middle of the Old Testament. And it is promised at a time the world seems to be falling apart; in the midst of Israel and Judah’s decline eventually leading to captivity in Babylon.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...”

It sounds wonderful, but to the people of Isaiah’s time it wasn’t received as such. The fact is, most people rejected Isaiah’s message because they didn’t like it. They wanted a message that their fortunes would be restored and that Jerusalem and Judah would be made great again in the here and now. They thought through their own planning, strategies and alliances they could make life good, so they didn’t want to wait on God. The wonderful promises of God were too distant, and I guess they thought themselves deserving of better, so they rejected God’s Word and God’s prophets and followed their own way.

Of course you and I know these promises of God stand true in the first advent of the one anointed, the Christ, who came, lived, died and rose to heal us from our sinful state and free us from death and condemnation. This all stands accomplished by the cross and empty tomb.

Yet we stand with ancient Israel in that the completion of these wonderful promises has yet to come to conclusion in the second advent of the Christ on the Last Day. So looking back on the failures of ancient Israel and knowing that their rejection has been written in Holy Scripture for our instruction, I think we must look at this wonderful Gospel in Isaiah and ponder an important theological question; how on earth could we manage to screw this up?

And I think you may be able to boil the answer down to a single word: Pride.

Pride had a lot to do with Israel’s rebellion against God. Though He had blessed Israel as His chosen people, they never seemed to be content to be His people for long. They thought better of themselves, thought themselves able to craft false gods who were more fun, who would obey their wishes. They often felt they were more crafty than God, in making military alliances with other nations rather than obeying God and leaning on Him for defense. Even in the time of Isaiah, they thought because they possessed Jerusalem and the temple there, they could never be defeated...even though God promised their defeat was coming. Pride placed them in opposition to God’s plan for them.

And when you look at the Gospel promise of Christ in Isaiah, pride is the thing that can leave you out from under its blessing.

“The Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...” It is pride that makes us think we’re not poor, that we have something of value in and of ourselves to hold before God. It is pride that keeps us from fully repenting of our sin, because we just don’t think we are that bad. But the good news isn’t for those who have something, it’s only for the poor, the needy.

“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...” What breaks a Christian’s heart? When we look at God’s perfect Law and see how badly we’ve shattered it in our sins. But pride looks away, says “I’m not that bad...not as bad as so and so.” Pride feels good about one’s self and the prideful heart is far from broken. But the promise isn’t for them, it’s for the brokenhearted.

“To proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound...” Pride looks at both God and Satan and says, “I’m free of both to be my own person!” Pride claims to be the top dog in charge of one’s own life and answering to no one. Pride doesn’t recognize that apart from God we are slaves to sin and bound to eternal death. But the Gospel isn’t for the free, it is freedom for the bound.

“To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...” The year of the Lord’s favor in ancient Israel is the Year of Jubilee, when all lands lost are restored and all debts are cancelled. But pride says “I don’t owe anyone anything—I am my own master!” Pride doesn’t see any need for the Lord’s favor, and thus does not grasp this promise by faith. Pride doesn’t need God or God’s promises.

If you look around the Christian church today, the Gospel is surely being proclaimed. But who is hearing it? I fear it’s a lot of people who are feeling pretty good about themselves. But look closely at these promises of God. Are they for people who are feeling pretty good about themselves? Is the repentant person a proud person? No.

The warnings against this are plentiful in Holy Scripture. All over Proverbs with sayings like, *“Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the LORD; be assured, he will not go unpunished.”* Jesus consistently railed against the prideful Pharisees, taught and lived humility, and called folks to meekness and repentance. The epistles warn the same. The last thing we hope is that when Jesus arrives, we’re feeling pretty good about ourselves.

Does this mean we should feel miserable? Most certainly not! We feel joyful, hopeful, faithful...all because of Jesus, the anointed of the Lord who is bringing us lowly sinners what we so desperately need—Good news, healing, liberty, freedom, the cancelation of our debt to God, restoration...peace with God!

We rejoice, and with rejoice for a reason, but that reason is never, ever ourselves! The reason is God in Christ Jesus, because He lovingly gives what we so desperately need! **He** fills everything we lack!

So repent! Repent and call on the name of Jesus for forgiveness. Jesus is coming, and on the day of His return it shall be a wonderful day for those in need. So every day remember Him, and be in need of Jesus.

Amen.