

December 11 – Third Sunday in Advent

“Waiting on God”

Dependability

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

This passage from Isaiah was quoted by Jesus, in the synagogue in Nazareth, at the beginning of his ministry. After reading it he said, “today this has been fulfilled in your hearing.” For Jesus, this passage from Isaiah laid out the mandate from God for his ministry. He had come to bring good news to all who are oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, and to proclaim liberty to the captives and prisoners. As we see Jesus in ministry we see in his healing, his preaching a message of God’s love and forgiveness, and his intentionally reaching out to the marginalized in his society, these words were being fulfilled.

What does all of this say to us today, in this season of Advent, this time of waiting? To answer that question we need to go back to when these words were first spoken. The prophet Isaiah believed that he had been commissioned by God to share this same good news. The words in Isaiah were not only for some future day when the Messiah would come but also for their time.

So, Isaiah, God's anointed, is the first sent to the oppressed, to the ones whose hearts are crushed, to the captives, the imprisoned and to all who mourn. We are back to the time after the return from exile when they were trying to rebuild the walls. They were oppressed, as a people. Some of their leaders were not caring about their trials. Though unstated, the prophet, of necessity, must confront the perpetrators and sources of oppression, marginalization, hopelessness and despair. Never an easy task.

He is called to transform the lives of the ordinary person. If the prophet is successful he will change the way the people see themselves, the way they are regarded by others and the ways they act. Hear the changes he is mentioning that should occur. Instead of the ashes on their heads -- a sign of humiliation and grief they are to be wearing a festive headdress or garland. They are to be treated as honored guests and anointed with "the oil of gladness". To replace their dull spirits they are to be given mantles of praise. He is calling for them to be treated as they are to become by the leaders of that day and by each other. He wanted them to know that in God’s eyes

that are not the humiliated, fragmented, dispirited and exploitative people that they might currently feel they are but instead a people of hope and vision. He wanted them to know they will accomplish what is needed and what has been so difficult: rebuilding Jerusalem as a city where righteousness and justice flourish. They need to start acting as people of this new city instead of as dispirited refugees. And the leaders need to act nobly instead of oppressively.

This new future is possible because God promises to be in "everlasting covenant with them". The city where hopelessness had taken root will, by God's spirit and by God's blessing, sprout righteousness and praise. You can depend upon it and start living into its reality. Jesus, in quoting this passage, shares that God has not forgotten this promise. God comes to us in our times of loss and hopelessness and fills us with hope a promise.

We need to hear in times of difficult waiting that you can depend upon God. Look at the end of this passage. There is a natural order to life. Just as shoots come forth in the spring so too will God's righteousness. It is saying that the current order is not what God intends. God will act. God will hold those who are not living righteously accountable. We are called to not live in response to current realities but instead as God intends.

I am reminded of a story my grandmother would tell. Grandpa was a section foreman for the railroad and as such they lived alongside the tracks in the section house. During the depression there were many knocks on the door as a hobo asked for a handout. They were usually willing to do some small chore for the meal. She recalled this one man who after cutting some kindling and receiving a sandwich sat down to read a book of poetry. This was highly unusual and so she struck up a conversation and found out that he had been a college teacher before the depression had closed his little school. He said he kept reading because he was positive that he would teach again. This is someone not letting the situations of the moment dictate his future. She was amazed that here was a college educated man eating a handout from her, a woman who had an 8th grade education.

In Luke's account of the birth of Jesus you have this theme concerning God at work bringing in righteousness. You have Mary and Joseph needing to journey to

Bethlehem because of the Emperor's decree. The baby is born in a stable. Only shepherds greet the birth. It is a story about the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized. But through them the good news of liberty, justice and righteousness has begun. This is part of the message we need to hear. When we are going through difficult times of waiting God is with us. God is dependable and just as spring follows winter so too does hope follow times of discouragement. We are called to not let our current situation define all of life but instead live today as if tomorrows joys are already a reality.

I know what I am saying is hard. At times when I look at all that is happening in life it is hard to not feel discouraged. Hunger and poverty are up all over, even here in Sequim. I am still amazed that the food bank gave out 1,000 turkeys and is predicting that they will need 700 for Christmas. Unemployment seems stuck at 9%. Our elected officials seem more concerned with blaming each other for the problems instead of working on solutions. We have heard just this week that it is too difficult to rewrite the budget of our state in such a short time so the special session is nothing but a prelude to the general session to come! This passage reminds me that God is dependable. I may not always see the justice of God played out in my life time but we can all depend upon it. It helps us answer the question, what happens when life isn't fair. It answers the question, "Does God care?" with an emphatic yes!

This gives us the ability to face our future in trust. As God came to the prophet telling him to preach a message of hope to returning exiles until they again felt life was good; as God came to Mary to say she would have the long awaited messiah; and as Jesus would stand up and repeat these words as his commission we know that our waiting is with hope.

In closing let me share one story of waiting. There had been a terrible row between a daughter and her parents. She had stormed out of the house saying that she would never see them or talk to them again. For over a year she had been good on her word, refusing to answer her mother's calls and ignoring messages written. Her mother continued to pray for healing and restoration of their relationship. She continued to reach out knowing that she would likely face rejection because she was not going to let the current problems define her relationship with her daughter. On Christmas Eve the

mother and father with their son and his family were in their accustomed pew for the service. Worship had begun and all were standing to sing the first carol. The estranged daughter came in the door to the church knowing her family would be there. At first she did not see them and almost turned to go. The usher, a longtime friend of the family, realized the importance of what he was seeing. Taking her by the arm he half drug her down the aisle. The pastor, watching this play out held his breath as the daughter reached the pew where her family was standing. The mother, sensing the commotion, turned to look and seeing her daughter opened her arms. She ran into them burying her face in her mother's shoulder. At that moment all the angry words were forgotten and all that mattered was that she was there. Later the daughter would say to the pastor, "I just couldn't stay away at Christmas." God had been at work and ashes had been replaced by a garland of joy.

This is what God is working at in our lives and in the life of the world. Depend upon it. You won't be disappointed.