

Isaiah 61 Righteousness and Praise

Here we are at the 3rd Sunday in Advent, 2017, only one week away from Christmas Eve. I trust that your decorations are all in place and shopping is completed; all the food is stored nicely in the refrigerator or freezer; so that there is nothing left but to savor the beauty of the season.

It is unclear whether we will have a white Christmas this year, but we hope for the good kind, with enough snow to make everything white but not so much that driving becomes unsafe.

We have spoken of Advent as a time to observe the coming of the Christ Child into the world; a getting ready for Christ's presence daily in our lives; and even an anticipation of Christ's triumphant return. It is a time of such good news that no matter the other circumstances of life, there is joy; a resilient joy that can't be diminished by the world's sadness or our own.

It is a time for the dream of justice and righteousness in a world characterized by their lack, and in which many have become suspicious that such dreams are not realistic.

Given the corruption of human nature, there will always be some kind of distortion, some injustice. Many times our hopes have been dashed by realities we experience on the ground, as it were, in real life.

The Prophet's Vision

We read, nonetheless, of the prophetic vision, one that is caught up again by Jesus in Luke's Gospel (ch. 4), and one that comes from someone whom had experienced no greater disappointments,

“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 that is where things end in Luke's gospel. Isaiah goes on to describe a world made right, resulting in delight and praise.

There is time in the other seasons of the year to contemplate our disappointments in the world, human failures with tragic results, but this is the time to set aside such visions and set in their place a greater vision of a perfect order; a time of peace, a time when;

“Instead of their shame, my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace, they will rejoice in their inheritance, they will inherit a double portion in their land; everlasting joy will be theirs.

Of course, Isaiah sees this vision in the time of Israel's disgrace, but it is not for them only; it grows into a

grand proclamation of the redemption of the human race, a message for all of us in every place, and in every time. I wonder if it is possible to see it again, given the failures that are ever before us.

“For I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery, and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them.”

The Little Goodnesses

For a few minutes on this beautiful Advent Sunday, let us train our thoughts on the problem of good, the little goodnesses if you will, we experience often and often take for granted, if we notice them at all.

In addition to the beauty of our surroundings, we live in a world where our basic needs have been met. I have awakened each day of my life to a place where the power has been on and so has been the water, the groceries have been in the store and the means to procure them sufficient. Let us be thankful for these blessings, we are not owed them, and they are not our own doing, but the Lord's.

The sovereignty of God is little considered by us and our world, though we give it lip service when it suits us. The message of the Bible is that people, left to their own resources, would make a mess of things, the power and the water would rarely be on, the groceries would be unavailable and, as well, the means to

procure them insufficient. But for God's grace the world would be chaos and disorder on such a scale that civilization would not be possible.

Life would be such a struggle that no one would have time away from the daily fight for survival, to create beautiful art or make music. There would be no Bach or Beethoven, no Michelangelo or Thomas Kinkeade. There is a “thin veneer of civilization” that separates us from ruin, not only of our world, but of our souls too. That thin veneer is God's Grace.

Prayers at meals . . .

The Football Team

I remember five years ago when my son Jonathan's football team came to within one game of a state championship. For about two months the town celebrated this rare accomplishment it had never known.

Some of the expressions of joy were so primal that I can't repeat them here, not won't, can't. The teachers put off all the tests and papers after the season. People stopped and visited with one another on the street for the first time in years. For a time, even the angry people were happy.

10,000 people showed up that day in Dekalb, IL, 300 miles away. There are only 5,000 people in that little

town. People came from Iowa, Wisconsin, and of course the whole Chicago area to be re-united for a day with their hometown friends and nobody cared they they lost the game.

This kind of thing is not unique, it happens all the time, and that is the point. In countless ways, things such as this happen all around the world. But they are not necessary. We are not owed, we do not deserve, and we are not able to achieve them on our own. They are God's grace.

And they point us to this larger, eternal reality of righteousness (a world made right), that leads to praise,

"I delight greatly in the Lord, my soul rejoices before my God."

Encouragement

The prophet's message is for us, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon us to offer encouragement to the discouraged, comfort to those in distress, light to those in darkness?"

Is it too much for us to believe that our lives are not headed for destruction, but salvation?

Even though it is not our doing, we can see it happening, and we can be a part of it. If the prophet

Isaiah saw it in his time when his world was falling apart, surely we can see it in ours.

"Just like 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."

So prepare yourself because the Redemption is near and that is the Christmas joy. It bottles up all the blessings of life into one season of celebration for all to share. We observe it at Christmas, but its reality is always with us. The more we learn to pay attention, the more we understand, until we see that the whole world is filled up with the goodness of God.

"The earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof."
Psalm 24:24

Regardless of what place you perceive yourself to be in your spiritual journey, hear the Advent message of the coming righteousness, and let praise spring up your heart for everyone to see.

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