

12.17.2023 Advent 3

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Rejoice always”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Today, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, the prophet Isaiah proclaims the Good News. These words by Isaiah were spoken by Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:16-21): “*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” Isaiah’s words are the core of the good news revealed in Jesus Christ.

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent we rejoice at the good news of the Messiah near to this world. We rejoice that Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s proclamation of God’s justice and love for the poor and the weak, the captive and all who suffer.

Today we read Isaiah’s words, reminding ourselves of the way God works in history. God has a stake in human history. The good news of the gospel is not simply about my own “personal” salvation; the good news is God’s justice and love for me, my neighbor, and this world. God’s salvation history involves each of us. It is good news of healing, liberty, and release for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captive, and the prisoner.

The light shines in the darkness, and John was sent by God into human history to witness to this light. The lights with which we illuminate our homes and communities this season symbolize the light of Christ shining in the darkness. John testified to the light so that through him, all might believe. Like John, we also are to testify to this light so that the world might continue to believe.

At no time in my memory has the world seemed so in need of light that shines in the darkness. Each day we are reminded that our world is adrift, divided, and broken. Ongoing religious and political difference, ongoing oppression of people because of their ethnicity or gender, and ongoing captivity to poverty and hunger shadow our communities and this world.

Today who stands with the oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, and imprisoned? Instead of mourning and ashes, who will give “*the garland and oil of gladness*” of which Isaiah writes? If the Messiah were to come again at this stage in human history, how would he judge the nations? Would he declare “*a year of the Lord’s favor*” or “*a day of God’s vengeance*?”

The prophetic themes of Advent reach much deeper than most of us are probably comfortable

with. Where are prophetic voices of God's justice and compassion in today's world? Where are messengers who speak for the weak and the oppressed in today's world? Where are leaders who understand their role in human history as prophetic voices declaring healing, liberty, and peace rather than division, captivity, and war? This year, the world cries out during Advent for peace and a glimpse of God near to us in human history.

How will our generation be remembered in history? Will we be remembered for maximizing profits; advancing our global market share; and protecting ourselves, or will we be remembered as a generation that protected the oppressed, advanced global peace, and maximized liberty for all who are powerless and captive?

Yet Advent's prophetic themes reach more deeply, asking, "How do you understand your role in human history?" What best describes the meaning and purpose of your life and work within God's history? Like the questions pointed at John the Baptist, "*Who are you? What do you say about yourself?*" – Isaiah's words press down upon us to answer with God's justice and compassion among the nations.

John the Baptist answered with great clarity. When religious leaders asked him, "*Who are you? What do you say about yourself?*" John answered, "*I am not the Messiah...I am a voice crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'*" John spoke with words rarely heard spoken by today's leaders. John understood himself as a messenger, not the leader of a faction, a party, or a nation. John said, "*I am a messenger for one who is greater than me.*" John witnessed to the light who is peace, healing, liberty, and comfort for all the world.

John's purpose for living was both humble and prophetic. John knew and believed in Jesus, who was born of Mary at Bethlehem. Their mothers, Elizabeth and Mary were family, and no doubt, John and Jesus knew one another from childhood. Certain of one thing, John declared, "*Among you stands one whom you do not know.*" John knew him, and wanted all people to know the peace, healing, and liberty of the Messiah.

There is a sacred mystery to human life. The gospel testifies to this mystery, calling it "*light*." This light that enlivens each person is the Messiah. Like, John, do you testify to the light of the Messiah? Like John, do you understand your life as "a moment" in history to share this light? Isaiah's words press down upon us. Can you answer like John that your life witnesses to the light of Christ, the Prince of Peace? God is at stake in human history through your life.

Emphasizing our differences as Christians, Jews, and Muslims doesn't get humanity off the

hook of fulfilling God's justice of compassion and mercy for one another. God is the God of peace, not of war, not of division, not of oppression. This God of light is the God of the nations. We cannot sing "*Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth*" at Christmas without revealing his justice among the nations every day. Over and over, humanity's sinfulness insists upon its national interests over the interests of God's justice in human history. Isaiah and John's words answers are difficult because they place God's justice squarely within human history – our history.

Today, Paul writes, "*May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*" The only one who sanctifies humanity is "*the God of peace.*" For Paul this is a message of joy! "*Rejoice always and pray without ceasing!*" The Lord is near; the God of peace will help you "*test everything and hold fast to what is good.*" Rejoice, the God of peace is at work in human history through you.

The light of Christ is the sacred mystery accompanying your journey. Walk in this light. Rejoice, and testify to the light of Christ.

"*Who are you?*" How will your life be remembered in God's history? The Lord has anointed you to bring good news of peace and healing, liberty, and comfort to this world.

Your life matters. The light is with you. Testify to the light. Amen.