

“Preaching Good News in Bad Times”

On this Third Sunday of Advent, normally we celebrate the gift of joy. The main text we will look at is from Isaiah 61:1, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he had anointed me, 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.*” There is a lot in just this one verse. This is the story of a prophetic utterance to those weary from exile, weary from the daunting task of rebuilding their city, culture and religious life.

The historical context of today’s lectionary passage of Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, is that the Israelites have just been released from exile. In those days, God was calling a people out of Babylonian captivity to a future with hope. But they faced much. Their city of Jerusalem and their Temple had been destroyed. The same question that had to be answered in Isaiah 6:8, “*Who will go for us and whom shall we send?*” is the daunting question of our day, as well.

In the midst of COVID-19, civil unrest, record unemployment, political polarization and economic uncertainty, the same questions remain today. How do we rebuild? How do we bring about needed reforms? How do we bring peace, justice and stability?

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In Isaiah 61, the prophet explains how the preacher must go. We are always brought back to the central questions of who and how. But we are called to preach, and that would be all of us based on our baptism, according to St. Jerome in the 4th century. Jerome declared, “Baptism is the ordination of the laity.” It is not just the role of the ordained to preach good news. No, all of us—each who have received the sacrament, the sign of God’s grace—are called to preach, pronounce and proclaim to a sin-filled world the Good News of God’s saving work. And Isaiah tells us how we are to do the work of sharing faith. He simply says, don’t try this preaching unless the Spirit of the Lord God is upon you.

He didn’t say, “Don’t you try it if you have not been licensed. Don’t try if you haven’t been ordained.” What he says is “Don’t try to preach without the Spirit of God.” This preaches to me and yes, to you, to saint and sinner. Yes, that same Spirit that hovered over chaos’ formless void. Yes, that same Spirit that carried out the creative will of God. The preacher says to all of us educated folks, if you are going to proclaim the Good News against a brassy sky, you better do it in the power of God’s creative spirit.

How are we going to preach with the power of God while COVID-19 continues to cast its long shadow of sickness and death? How are we going to preach to a nation divided by race and class, and yes, political affiliation? We have

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tried all the other conventions, the human ideas. But the preacher prophet Isaiah says we ought to preach with the creative energy of the Lord God. If we are to confront the chaos of our day, we need the Spirit of the Lord to rise and rest upon us.

This text suggests some guidance for our preaching. First, let us not accept any assignment to preach to people before we receive the anointing from the Spirit of the Lord God. The prophet Isaiah knew he couldn't do it alone. He needed the Lord's Spirit. He knew Zion (Jerusalem) and the people of Zion were in ruins from the ground up. Weary from more than 40 years of captivity, weary from being disconnected from the land that gave them life, they were longing from the days of old when the temple wasn't lying in ruins and the city was not pushed down by poverty and political anarchy. They were tired and "tired of being tired." Does this feeling seem familiar in our world today? This Isaiah knew that without the Spirit of the Lord, no preacher would be able to preach prophetically in a poverty-stricken, politically fragile city like Zion.

Turn to your neighbor and say, "We need the power of the Lord God." We must preach because the Lord has anointed us, has sent us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. We must preach the power of the Lord, even as the news

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we listen to rehashes the ills of our society. The lead story is seldom in the “Good News” category, and yet we must find a note of grace in a sad song and preach Good News in these difficult times.

This preacher is called and commanded to preach Good News in bad times, During this COVID-19, George Floyd era, we need to be anointed with the Spirit of the Messiah, to not only announce the word, but to be co-creators of Good News in bad times.

The second piece of advice is the word of God has been made flesh, but without the anointing of the Messiah, we the church simply make it word again. Isaiah isn't simply suggesting that we preach the word, but that we also embody it--that we give it flesh and blood and make it live.

There are many we can approach in person who are in need. The widow living off the mite, the single mother trying to make ends meet, the senior citizens living off their Social Security, trying to decide whether to buy meat or medicine. The scandal of the word of God and the scandal of Christ coming to earth in the flesh is that God cares for those who are living on the margins, often in silent sight of our churches, but often not in the hearts of the established assembly of believers.

The third thing we learn is we are to announce the year of the Lord's favor, a

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day of vindication. In God's timing, Israel's fortunes will be reversed and the nations will in turn acknowledge Israel's legitimacy. In Isaiah 61 the prophet announces grace to the forgotten. He announces hope to the hopeless. He offers justifying grace to prove to the oppressors that the oppressed will not be pressed down forever. Isaiah is announcing what some call the "Gospel of Particularity." This is Good News to the poor, to those whom the late Howard Thurman called the "disinherited" and "those whose backs are against the wall."

One way we preach is living out our convictions and having the courage to go against the status quo. An example of this is found in the life and witness of one of the least known of America's founding fathers. It is a story of how one embodied the word of God and made God's word live among the people. This illustration is taken from a book I am currently reading, *The Politics of Jesus*, by Obery M. Hendricks, Jr.

From the day of his birth in February 1728, Robert Carter III was a charter member of America's colonial aristocracy. He lived next to George Washington and was the friend of Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry and other members of the Revolutionary elite, but he was distinct. He was the richest of them all and held more slaves than Washington and Jefferson combined.

Carter enjoyed the privileges and advantages great wealth afforded him. He lived in a large mansion. He owned a textile factory, some twenty plantations, a commercial bakery and nearly five hundred slaves.

Like Jefferson and Washington, Carter was first a Deist. Then, in June 1777, while suffering from what he later described as “a Fever Heat” from a smallpox inoculation, Carter experienced what he called a “most gracious illumination of his spirit.” That began for Carter a religious quest in which he read dozens of religious books and sought out preachers of every denomination. A year into the quest, he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, “I do now testify that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that through him mankind can be saved only.”

Unlike the conversions of many, Carter’s conversion went beyond words and pious pondering. As Carter watched the religious impulses of the slaves he had all his life dismissed as social inferiors-if not a lower form of human life-he observed that their experience with God was the same as his own. That realization convinced him of the equality of all humanity in the eyes of God. On September 5, 1791, Carter began to put into action what the signers of the Declaration of Independence only wrote about. He demonstrated that “all men are created equal” by signing a document-a “Deed of Gift”-with which he freed every slave he owned, some five hundred, the largest number of enslaved human beings ever

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freed in America by anyone. Only the number freed by the Emancipation

Proclamation surpasses it.

Carter's actions caused much upset among his white contemporaries for setting what they feared was a dangerous precedent. He was ostracized. Even Thomas Jefferson and several other signers of the Declaration of Independence objected to Carter's actions as subversive to the colonies' social balance and racial relations.

Carter's actions cost him financially. Socially, it cost him as well. To escape the controversy and the derision of his peers, he moved to Baltimore, where he died in 1804, virtually alone. Yet his courage and willingness to put into deeds the egalitarian, liberationist ethics of his faith the Founding Fathers only put into words laid the groundwork for an interracial republic. Robert Carter III showed what it really means to become a "new creature in Christ Jesus" in the words of the apostle Paul. He did not just proclaim the alternative; he demonstrated through the witness of his own life and the sacrifice of his livelihood. And our nation is better for it.

There is Good News coming for those whom justice has evaded. A day of vindication and justice is on the way. This word of liberation, spoken first under the anointing of the Lord's Spirit in Isaiah, is spoken once again by the Lord's

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Messiah, Jesus as he opens the scroll in the synagogue and gives good news to the poor in Luke 4:17-19. *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* Beloved, we are the preaching congregation anointed and assigned to bring Good News in bad times. Let us begin our work!

Credit is given to the Rev. Dr. Reggie Lee for use of excerpts from his sermon outline and sermon for this week’s sermon.