

Isaiah 61:1-6
Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 23, 2022

A new year often brings the optimism of a fresh start. I haven't sensed that feeling much this year. I suppose we are all filled with pandemic fatigue. Last year the vaccine was rolling out and we hoped it would put the virus behind us. Then came the variants and more people succumbed to infection. A record number of cases still fill hospitals. Restrictions on our activities remain in many places. We have begun to question whether life will ever return to normal.

As with all problems, the more we focus on it, the worse it seems. This text lifts our eyes to the Lord and his promises and lifts our spirits as we hear him proclaim

THIS IS THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR

- I. As his Servant proclaims good news to sinners
- II. As his servants rebuild ruins

We receive the message that this is the year of the Lord's favor as his Servant proclaims good news to sinners. He used the picture of captives to convey the good news. Captivity in Babylon loomed for the people of Judah, the only remaining portion of God's Old Testament nation. Isaiah had been warning of the prospect because of the infidelity of the people. They were not being faithful to God and to his covenant with them. Life would be miserable when an enemy army swept through the land, destroying homes and farms, cities and even the temple of the Lord. Nearly the entire population would be uprooted and taken hundreds of miles away to Babylon. However, God also promised a return after seventy years in exile. That prospect filled the people's hearts with hope and gave them something to cling to in faith as the troubles came.

The positive conditions were what God's prophet Isaiah shared in this text. He spoke of freedom for the captives and release from prison. Those changed conditions would be great when they happened, yet in the grand scheme of history, they did not deserve the huge buildup and action reflected in the prophet's words. The sainted professor and theologian of our synod's past, August Pieper, wrote in his commentary on these latter chapters of Isaiah that seeing the action only as the return of refugees to Judah would be like a mountain going through labor pains and then delivering a mouse. God had something much bigger in mind but he used terms and references the people would understand to give them hope and a future.

What we have here is a prophecy of the Savior and his work. He was the speaker who stated, "The Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." "Good

news" is the origin and meaning of the term "gospel." "The Anointed One" was the meaning of "Messiah," the Savior whom the Old Testament worshipers awaited and whom the Lord was sending to rescue the world from the captivity of sin.

Any debate about that identity was settled in the Gospel reading for this Sunday. Jesus was preaching in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth. He read the opening verses of Isaiah 61 and announced, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." While that claim roused first amazement and later murderous anger in the hearts of his fellow Nazarenes, it was the truth. He brought the conditions described.

The poor he talked about were in spiritual poverty. We are all beggars before God, with no credits on our accounts. Rather, our records are filled with sins. To us needy sinners Jesus announces forgiveness, won by his suffering and death on the cross. He also proclaims freedom for those captive in Satan's clutches, which is also our natural condition. We were in the prison of darkness, that being sin and unbelief. He reached out in mercy to the brokenhearted who are troubled by their sinful condition, hurting from the strife it brings into relationships as we act with selfishness and in unthinking ways. He brought comfort for those who mourn over their sins and its effects, including the deaths of loved ones. Pretty much takes in all of us, right?

Instead of misery and woe the Messiah announced "the year of the Lord's favor." That imagery comes from an Old Testament event, the Year of Jubilee. It occurred every fifty years. Debts were cancelled, slaves were freed, property returned to its original owners and the land rested from tilling.

Like all of those actions pictured, we see changes where Christ comes. He will "bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair." The nation did not need to sit in self-pity and grief but could celebrate life with joy and gladness. There was something much greater coming than a return from Babylon to the land of Judah. While that return was important because it meant God kept his word and that the ancestral line of the Savior was intact, more vital was what he brought as the foundation of the Christian Church. Even that larger fulfillment of the prophecy did not bring an existence free of troubles and sorrows. The ultimate scenario of these words occurs in the heavenly home that is ours because Jesus came and carried out his mission of living and dying to rescue us from sin and its consequences.

His work is ours through faith. Being converted to faith has an effect in our lives. "They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor." The text designated a tree called the terebinth, which was an evergreen, showing lasting life. To convey the message to us, translators used the oaks imagery. As we look to the spiritual picture we think of strong, sturdy, productive trees rooted in the Word of God, growing stately and strong, covered with Christ's righteousness and living in the ways of the Lord. A life of sanctification now results and then a life lived to the full in the joys of heaven.

Although addressed to people in seventh century B.C. Judah to direct and prepare them for the Savior's coming, the prophet also speaks to twenty-first century Christians in the US and in Whitewater, Wisconsin. We have received the good news as it happened in fulfillment. There is reason for joy and for lives of gratitude as we are assured of our Lord's forgiveness and blessings each day and eternally. This is the year of the Lord's favor.

II.

We are also part of the remainder of the text as his servants rebuild ruins. The imagery again reflects the captivity return. The land of Judah had been left desolate after the marauding armed forces swept through their territory. Some stragglers remained plus others who had moved in, but there was no wealth or opportunity to do much. Upon their return, the captives set to work rebuilding homes, returning the land to production and constructing a new temple. Isaiah mentioned aliens helping in the work. Those who had moved into the land joined in the process. The restoration was a blessing but the picture carries so much more meaning when we view it in a spiritual light.

We can see the Christian Church in the New Testament as fitting the description. The good news that Jesus established with his work for our salvation and which he proclaimed wins followers. They come from both the Jews and the Gentiles. We who were once foreigners are now fellow citizens with God's people. In fact, with great influx from nations around the globe, the majority of the Church is now of Gentile origin.

In the Christian Church we work together, no matter what ethnic or racial background we come from. We can see that diversity even in our small synod of German heritage. Through missionaries and technology we are at work in many parts of our country and in lands encircling the planet. We are united in faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, who came for all people, and we share the love of Jesus with everyone we can.

In that work we experience a change in roles. "You will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God." In Old Testament Israel only men from the tribe of Levi and descendants of Aaron (the brother of Moses) could serve as priests. They presented the sacrifices for the people as mediators between God and humans. This role reflected the separation from God that sin causes. Priests also prayed for the people.

Now that Jesus has carried out his work as our Savior we are reconciled with God. That gives us access to him. We offer our own praises in worship. We tell others the good news of Christ. The recent Bible study on the divine call reminded us we are part of the universal priesthood of believers. All Christians have this privilege and role, so you are included as a priest of the Lord. While some serve in the public or representative ministry in our behalf, all of us are involved in the work of the Lord and seek to spread his glory. Our time is dedicated to his service in all we do, at home, in the workplace or classroom, when out and about in the community, as well as at church. We let our light shine and we are prepared to give testimony as the opportunity arises.

Our role includes supporting the work with our offerings. "You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast." As individuals come to faith they show their gratitude to the Savior by sharing their treasures. God has blessed each of us with a degree of financial resources. We recognize that everything we enjoy came from the Lord and belongs to him. So we will use all that we have as an expression of our faith and for God's purposes, including the support of ourselves and our families, to help others and to pay taxes. We also return a portion to enable gospel work to be done, through our congregation, our Lakeside Lutheran High School, our synod missions at home and internationally and through other special ministries. One that comes to mind this weekend near the anniversary of the legalization of abortion is the prolife work of our Christian Life Resources. As we join together, the work grows and so does God's kingdom, under his blessing and by the power of his Spirit. The message rebuilds broken hearts and ruined lives as we share the Savior's love.

When we get to hear and be comforted by the gospel, it is the year of the Lord's favor. As we use our privilege to tell others it becomes so for both them and us. Troubles dot, even fill our experiences in the year ahead, but in Jesus and his faithful love for us, it is a good year, the year of the Lord's favor.