

“Manifesto for Living”

*A Sermon Written by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver
for First Congregational Church of Lebanon
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Isaiah 61:1-4

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; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. ⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

This past week, Margaret Keenan of Britain was the first person to receive the vaccine for the coronavirus. She was followed by one of her countrymen, named—I kid you not—William Shakespeare, and then a number of others. Good news, no doubt about it, for those in the UK and for all those around the world waiting for a shot. But the scourge of the pandemic remains with the British people and with us, and it will for some time.

Still, there is no denying that we have entered a new, more hopeful stage in this long crisis when discussions are focusing on when doses will be available, who should get priority, and how many companies might be making the drug, as opposed to whether any vaccine, let alone an effective one, would even be possible to make. Again, all welcome news, as we venture deeper into what is forecast to be a bleak, trying winter here in the Northern Hemisphere. In the coming months, there may be times when it will be hard to remember that our medical deliverance is at hand. We may fret. We may worry. We will just want things to be the way they were. We most likely will not think about the kind of future we want to see unfold.

Yet that is exactly what we should be doing at a moment like this. It is now, the dawn of a new day, when tomorrow's course has yet to take shape, that we are best equipped to nudge events along to our liking, maybe even to fashion a new world.

Perhaps this seems like a fanciful idea, pie-in-the-sky stuff. But what, then, was the Marshall Plan? In the wake of the devastation of World War II, a continent lay in ruins, and the United States stepped in to help Europeans rebuild their lives. Was this all altruism on America's part? Of course not. Statesmen in Washington recognized that a shattered Europe would be easy prey to Stalin's predations. And so it was in our country's

interests to help build something better than what existed before. What ensued, though, was more than calculated self-interest. The United States went above what was needed to help Europe scrape by, providing the aid and support that would help not only its allies but also its erstwhile foes create a much brighter future.

Moments of bold vision are not common. Often they are squandered—one need only consider the aftermath of the First World War, a time of grudges, recrimination, and a desire to just resume doing things as they had been done before, which ultimately led to the aforementioned Second World War.

But such times are a recurring feature in history, including in the long-ago world of the Bible. We don't know who delivered the prophecies in the third part of the Book of Isaiah, whether it was one person or a group, a man or a woman, a follower of the one dubbed Second Isaiah or someone simply shaped by the vision and poetry of his or her predecessor. What we do know is that his vision was breathtaking, a gift and a challenge to the band of Jews who returned from the Babylonian Exile to their ancestral homeland. They had been given a new start in Jerusalem. But excitement quickly turned to disillusionment.

The city lay in ruins. Foreign squatters were living there. Some in the community were already engaging in corrupt practices. If this was restoration, many people wanted a reboot. It was into this troubled landscape that our prophet entered, bringing a word of hope, a vision of possibility, a challenge to dream.

It was this generation, returned from exile, that had been charged with rebuilding Zion. They had choices to make. The question facing them as they emerged from devastation wasn't a matter of what kind of houses they wished to build. Rather, it was what kind of society they sought.

The prophet had some suggestions from the Almighty to offer. He was directed to “bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.” And the list goes on.

Isaiah 61 reads like a manifesto or political platform. Imagine the earnest candidate at the podium, wanting to help his community regain lost greatness, to build something better. So, he shares his good news, especially for the oppressed. He wants to bring healing to those with broken hearts, to offer freedom to those who are living in captivity, to say that this is God's hour and he will punish his foes, while also comforting those who are grieving.

The funny thing is that we can see this program articulated both in sixth-century-BC Jerusalem and in 21st-century America. This Advent manifesto, with its challenge to us

of what we will build when we build anew, was meant not just for the ancients but also for us, just as Jesus believed it was meant for the people of his day.

Do you remember how I told you last week that the New Testament is filled with misquotes of the Hebrew Bible? Well, here's a significant one—in Luke 4, Jesus reads from the Torah at the synagogue in his home town and says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Gotcha!

Really?

Do you remember how I also said that it was the intent, the meaning that mattered to those early Christians? Jesus, to be clear, said *something* that Sabbath. Perhaps he read word-for-word what was written in Isaiah. Luke, who wrote this report of Jesus visiting with his local congregation decades after Christ’s death and resurrection, may have gotten some of the particulars wrong, but he sure was true to the message: a new day is coming; what will it look like? An assurance for the Jews returning from exile, a promise for a people lost in their own land, a gift and a challenge to us today.

Isaiah 61, Luke 4, and today’s Gospel reading all share in common that they offer a witness. Notice how John has no modifier after his name. He’s not a Baptist, or Prophet, or Angry Man in the Desert. He’s just John. Of course, he’s not *just* John but a powerful witness to the One who matters, just like the author of Third Isaiah. They both wanted their audiences to really think about what they would do with this new opportunity, this second chance given to them by God—who also wants us to think about what we’ll hope and work for in the future.

Advent recalls something that took place long ago, but it is also a season when we can prepare for a new reality. That isn’t some future in the clouds, above the sky, with God somewhere else. No, it will unfold in this world, and we need to ask if we will heed the witness of those ancient prophets, if we will listen to what they said the Lord wanted for his creation.

Both Isaiah and Luke use the word *anointed* to describe God’s herald. It’s not a term that appears often in the Hebrew Bible, but you may remember what it means—*Messiah*, the one sent by God. In Greek the term translates to *Christ*.

And so, this Third Sunday of Advent, we should be bold and ask what it is that God’s anointed, the one we call the Christ, wants of us, what kind of world he would have us build in a post-Covid era. He would have us not look to the past, whether we’re inclined to make something great again or rebuild something better. He would have us remember

but break free from what has come before and look to the world we should want. That is the good news he shares with all of us.

We are called to bring good news to the oppressed, whether people under the thumb of a brutal dictator; or minorities who have been short-changed through the bigotry of low expectations; or the person who has done his jail time but is still burdened by newly imposed constraints on his ability to participate fully in our civic life; or those who fear law enforcement agents; or anybody who is hemmed in, held down by the oppression of governments, people, anxiety, prejudice, or worries. But what does it mean to “bring good news”? Here we recognize that reading or hearing involves interpretation. Surely, we are not called simply to mouth platitudes. No, we are called to make the good news a reality, to translate words into deeds, to work so that the oppressed may enjoy life to the fullest, as should be the case for any of God’s children.

We are called to heal the brokenhearted, whether they are loved ones who have been crushed by the pandemic and the toll it has taken on the economy; or neighbors who have had to watch from afar as loved ones have died from Covid-19; or someone who is in need of friendship and caring after a relationship has ended or a dream died; or that person who cries out against a world that puts so much emphasis on an imagined perfection and makes little room for the fallible individual who may just be us.

We are called to proclaim liberty and release captives and prisoners. Now, we know that when this part of Isaiah was preached and written, the Jews were returning from exile. They were a people that had been taken captive but were given their freedom. So we should be especially alert to what today might be meant by “captives and prisoners.” We should be mindful of those who are political prisoners or whose governments abuse them. We might think of Uighurs in China, or perhaps the Tibetans. We might think of the entire population of North Korea. The list of those deserving liberty and release is long. But lest we think this is only a problem for nations overseas, we might look at our own jails and prisons and immigration detention centers, and ask who truly belongs there. Or consider the conditions that prevail in our penitentiaries, and ask if that is what we as a people following Christ want to be done in our name.

We know that this is the time when we should want to earn God’s favor, but what does it mean for us to talk about his day of vengeance? I believe the prophet was calling his compatriots, and is calling us, to acknowledge that in a world of hurt and strife, pain and senseless death, we need not add to the suffering. If the Lord is to exact vengeance, it is not our job to act on his behalf. We should leave to God what God must do. Instead we should look to do what God would have us do, “building up ancient ruins” and “repairing the ruined cities.” Where do we invest our money and resources, time and energy? Each year, around July 4, we lift up “alabaster cities” when we sing “O Beautiful for Spacious

Skies.” As we look to shape our collective future, might we not commit ourselves to building a country where this is not merely aspirational but something we make happen?

But most of all, we should remember that those who were returning from exile, and those of us who look to a world renewed, should hear and embrace the words that we “comfort all who mourn” and that “we give them a garland instead of ashes.” The future is not set in stone. We are not hapless automatons. Just because things have always been one way does not mean they must always stay that way.

We have been called by God to be stewards of his good creation, to be repairers of the breach. This work, this vocation, has not been given to someone else. It has been given to you and me. So, let us imagine a future centered on compassion and empathy, not on being cold-hearted and selfish.

A world that comports with God’s hope and dreams for us.

A way of life that puts Christ’s will, and not our own misguided desires, at its center.

What kind of world will we walk into in the aftermath of the pandemic? Will it be the world as it was, with all of its fault lines, lost opportunities, and needless bickering?

Or will it be a world built on the vision and the promise of Isaiah 61?

What do you think John was pointing to when he preached in the desert?

What do you think the babe born in Bethlehem, the one who grew up to be the Christ, wanted for us?

The same-old-same-old?

I think not. I believe he wanted an Advent future for each and for all of us.