

Third Sunday after Epiphany – January 27, 2019

Isaiah 61:1-6

1 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, 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to 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. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. 4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. 5 Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. 6 And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.

When a congregation is looking to call its next pastor or teacher, often they will develop a list of abilities and qualities that they are looking for in their next called worker. The longer that the list becomes, the more specific the abilities that are requested, the smaller the pool of candidates will be to draw from. When this process is started it is not known who the next called worker will be. That is only revealed after a call or series of calls has been made and the call is accepted. Our sermon text is really a list of abilities, not for a pastor or teacher, but for the Messiah. Isaiah prophesied very specifically of whom this Savior would be and what he would come to do. But as he wrote these verses the full identity of the Messiah had not been revealed and would not be revealed for centuries. In the season of Epiphany we focus on how Jesus revealed himself to the world. Our gospel lesson for today removed any mystery to this prophecy as Jesus read these opening verses of Isaiah and proclaimed, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” As we study these verses in detail this morning/evening we will unpack all the details that are described and see clearly how **Scripture Has Been Fulfilled**.

The prophet Isaiah wrote his book some 700 years before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Yet he could describe things in the future as God inspired him to write these words. As we study prophecy we know that there are different layers, different fulfillments that are often described. First, Isaiah was writing to his fellow countrymen, warning of judgment for their unfaithfulness, but also promising restoration back to Jerusalem after their exile. Second, Isaiah was also writing about the coming Messiah who could come to bring salvation and deliverance. Finally, Isaiah wrote about the ultimate restoration, the eternal life in heaven that is waiting for all believers. From Isaiah's viewpoint, all three fulfillments blended into one perspective. It's a lot like looking at a mountain range. As you drive out west and start to see the Rocky Mountains, from a distance all the peaks look like they're right next to each other. But as you get closer, as you drive into the mountains you realize that there is often great distances between those peaks. So from Isaiah's distance these events all blended together when they were actually separated by hundreds and even thousands of years.

Verse 1: “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,” While there is an element here of Isaiah speaking about the Lord calling him to his ministry as a prophet for God's people, as our gospel lesson stated, Jesus here is the ultimate fulfillment. This verse begins by

describing the interactions of the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This brings to mind when all three were present at Jesus' baptism. That was where Jesus was anointed, designated for service and revealed as the Messiah—the anointed one.

The rest of this verse gives four powerful pictures that describe the Messiah's purpose. "He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." By nature everyone in this world is poor in relation to God. There is nothing in us that has any value when it comes to standing before God, nothing that we can offer when it comes time to pay the debt of our sins. But Jesus came with good news—he would take our place. His perfect life of righteousness would become ours and he would pay off our debts so that we can stand before God rich with his blessings.

"He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted." There are many things that can break our hearts, from pain and suffering to death and loss to our own record of sins against our God. But Jesus came to bind up, to repair our broken hearts. He has removed the guilt of our sins and has promised to be with us throughout the heartaches of this life.

He has sent me "to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." The Israelites would be taken captive away from their land, but there would be release and restoration. Likewise everyone in this life has been taken captive by the devil, by nature he owns us. Sin is a dark prison, when one is caught in a sinful behavior there is no stopping it because you're in the dark and cannot see your way out. But Jesus came to defeat the devil's power and set us free from his control. He came to show us a way out of the dark prison of sin, to set us free from its control of our lives.

Verse 2 continues: "to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." In Old Testament times, God had directed his people to celebrate the year of Jubilee – a time when all debts were cancelled, when all slaves were set free. This fresh start was a picture of the ultimate freedom that would be theirs in heaven. Just as the end would reveal the Lord's favor, it would also reveal his judgment and vengeance. Those who had rejected God, those who seemed to get away with things in this life, would not escape that final judgment.

Verse 2 continues into verse 3: "to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to 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." When Jerusalem and Solomon's temple would be destroyed by the Babylonians it would be a day of mourning for many. The prophet Jeremiah wrote his book of Lamentations as a response to that terrible event. But there would be comfort for those who mourned as God would allow them to return from exile. Any number of things can cause us to mourn and grieve in this life. But death would be near the top of that list. But here too Jesus came to solve that problem. His resurrection means our own resurrection where we will be crowned and dressed with glory. Instead of despair at the loss of a loved one, we can rejoice at their victory in heaven and know that we will see them again soon.

Verse 3 finishes: "They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor." There is something stately about a tall tree that has stood for decades or even centuries, weathering the storms of this world. The same is true for God's people. He has planted us to endure the ups and downs of this world, to display his splendor and glory to those around us.

Verse 4: "They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations." With the Israelites in mind, they would return to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Although it would never be the

same as before, the Lord would give them this blessing. For all believers, while we live in a world that is decaying and falling apart, we look forward to our home in heaven, built to last for an eternity.

Verses 5 & 6: “Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.” For the Israelites, the idea of interacting with aliens and foreigners would have seemed strange. They were to keep separate from the Gentile nations. But Jesus would come to change all that. His would come to save not just the Jewish people, but people of all nations, you and I included. Also strange to the Israelites would be the idea of everyone being priests. Formerly only a select few were priests, the intermediaries between God and man. But with Jesus’ sacrifice that barrier would be removed so that everyone could have that direct access to God.

Prophecy is truly an amazing thing. For writers like Isaiah to be able to describe events hundreds and even thousands of years in the future shows how much God played a role in writing of his word and that it is truly divinely inspired. The Messiah that Isaiah described in these verses could only have one fulfillment – the God-man, Christ Jesus, who came to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners. As we see Jesus revealing himself in this season of Epiphany, may we too reveal him to those around us in our own lives to share the comfort that we have and point out that Scripture has been fulfilled. Amen.