

## **Third Sunday of Advent December 17 2023**

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24;**

**John 1:6-8, 19-28**

In our reading from the Gospel of John today it is very clear that John knows who he is not. He is not a prophet. He is not Elijah. He is most definitely not the Messiah. John defines who he is as the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness” He prepares the way for one coming later.

He is the one who is tilling the ground, shaking things up, opening people’s minds. For what? For the one who will usher in a new kingdom. A new reign.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus reads this text from Isaiah in the synagogue. Deliberately hunts it up. Reads it. Sits down to teach and then says that those assembled have seen the fulfillment of that text. Right there in front of them.

Unlike John, Jesus is very clear about who he is. He is the one anointed by God. The one who is sent to bring good news to those afflicted through no fault of their own, to bandage the broken hearted- those who have had their inner human being broken into pieces. To proclaim liberty to those held captive. Release to those who are bound. To give those who mourn a garland not ashes.

This is the content of the Good News that Jesus brings. To that time and to our time.

Jesus proclaims good news to those who are afflicted through no fault of their own. Going to school and met by a gunman, bombed because you live in Kherson, Ukraine and Putin has decided he wants it, attending a concert in the

desert and attacked, killed, kidnapped because of who you are. Homes and businesses destroyed, friends and family killed because of the response someone else's actions. Cancer that comes from nowhere, accidents that cripple, a lost job that creates financial distress, lack of food because of weather. Jesus proclaims good news in all of these situations.

Jesus bandages those who have had their inner human being broken into pieces. Shattered by betrayal, loneliness, their afflictions, and addictions. He gathers those pieces and pulls them back together. Knits them with God's shalom, God's peace into a full human being again. Not with invisible flaws, but like the Japanese art of kintsugi, where the flaws are made clear by the beauty of how they are fixed.

Jesus releases those who are bound- by prejudice or hate. By fear and mistrust. By greed and avarice. By self-doubt and shame. Jesus proclaims liberty to all who are captive to sin, death, and the devil. All the forces that defy, deny God. Jesus frees us from the weight of others' expectations and our own.

This is the good news that Jesus proclaims, embodies, brings. Jesus looks out across the world and sees it as God does. Redeemed. Free. A world that trusts in God and God's promise. God's proclamation- that this world, as we see it, is not how things really are. For in Jesus. Through Jesus. All things have been made new again. We just don't always see it. Our vision is held captive.

John knows very well who he is not- but he also knows very well who Jesus is. And so, he points clearly to him. Beyond himself to the one who will in fact save people.

Just not in the way they expect.

This is especially true in the Gospel of Mark, where Jesus spends a lot of time trying to readjust people's expectations of the Messiah. To shift their imagination from a great warrior, prince, ruler who will overcome the world by force of arms. To a great teacher, healer, lover of human beings who will overcome the world through the breadth of his love. A love that will accept the worst (we think) this world can throw at him... death, shame, pain... and who will take that upon himself and show how powerless it really is.

In my time here at St. John I have had several children who have mistaken me for God or Jesus. At First Lutheran in Cedar Rapids, I once had an unhoused man literally fall on his knees at my feet and grab my hand, almost kissing it, thanking me for helping him with some funds for food. Heady stuff, all. But the example of John helped guide me. I am very clear about what I am not.

I am not a prophet, I am not the messiah, I am not your savior. I am merely the vessel by which the one who is messiah and savior can act to be that for others. So, I pointed beyond myself- it was God who was providing, I just was lucky enough to be the means.

I am, as well as I can, the voice of one crying in this wilderness of the world, look here is the way to life fuller and more abundant. Look here is the one who is worthy of being our king. Who is trustworthy in ways no other human can be or has been. Who is steadfastly loyal to us, to the promises made to us. As God's beloved creation.

You are God's beloved creation. Fearfully and wonderfully made.

You, too, are called and equipped to proclaim these truths about Jesus. To bear witness to others in your life that the beloved of God has come near in this little child born in Bethlehem.

That in this mewling, puking, sleeping child we find God's strength and power. That in his teaching we have painted for us a picture of the world as God intended. And in the death and resurrection of Jesus we find the chasm between that world and the one that surrounds us bridged.

We find the truth that death, disease, destruction actually have no power over us ultimately. Instead, it is God who wins. Not through violence and force, but rather through love. Compassion. Reconciliation.

God who sees all those afflicted through no fault of their own. Who hears their cries and stories. Who weeps with them, listens to their stories, and who brings healing and wholeness such that the world alone cannot give.

God who looks at the shattered human being within you. The one you hide behind the facade of your tik tok, Instagram, or other social media. The grin and "I'm fine" you flash to friends and family.

God who tells you it will be alright and lovingly pulls those pieces back together, pulls you back together and binds you up with his love and grace. So you experience true shalom- peace.

God who frees you from that voice in your head that says you're not enough. Good enough, worthy enough, pretty enough, tough enough.... Who looks you right in the eyes and says, you are enough, because God has made you so.

God who gives us a vision of how the world ought to be and is through Jesus.

We are called and equipped to be voices crying in the wilderness of this world. A chorus of voices saying, we ain't the Messiah. We aren't your salvation. But we can sure point you in the right direction. Just look to this babe, born in Bethlehem. This child is the reason we rejoice at all times- because we know that in him God wins. This child is the reason we pray without ceasing, why we give thanks in all circumstances. This child, this man, this Jesus.

And so on this "almost" last Sunday of Advent, let us rejoice and proclaim with John the truth we know- That our savior comes and that right soon.

Thanks be to God!