

Scripture Reading for December 13 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11 (NIV)

61 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim 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 joy 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.

“For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them.⁹ Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”

¹⁰ I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.

Luke 1:46b-55 (NIV)

“My soul glorifies the Lord⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Sermon: “What Does God’s Salvation Look Like?”

Luke’s Gospel tells us of an elderly man, called Simeon, who is described as waiting for God to *comfort* or *console* Israel.¹ That word “comfort” brings back echoes of Isaiah 40 from last week, remember: “‘Comfort, O Comfort my people’, says your God.”² Simeon was apparently waiting in expectation and hope for the arrival of that kind of divine consolation. We are told that one day Simeon was moved by the Holy Spirit to go to the Temple forecourt and there he happened to meet Mary and Joseph, who were visiting.³ Ageing Simeon took the baby Jesus into his arms – and I can’t help but wonder what Mary’s reaction was at that moment(!) - and, as he does so, he prays: “Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. *I have seen your salvation* which you have prepared *for all people*. This child is a light to reveal yourself to *all the nations*, and he is the glory of your people Israel!”⁴ This is a remarkable prayer and blessing for Mary and Joseph to hear, and was – no doubt - a memorable experience.⁵ It also confirmed to them what the shepherds had told them earlier concerning the angels’ message, namely, that their baby is a “*Savior, the Messiah, the Lord* - and that this is good news for *all people*.”⁶ This leads me to my question today, “*What Does God’s Salvation Look Like?*” Luke gives us various answers. Through this story of Simeon, Luke’s first response is that *to recognise* Messiah Jesus⁷ is to see *God’s* salvation itself. Simeon’s heart was moved by the Holy Spirit to recognize in *this particular* vulnerable baby, God’s comfort and salvation was being realized before his eyes. Simeon was also inspired by the Spirit to say that Jesus is a revealing *light* to non-Jews *and* Jews alike, he is the savior of the world!⁸ And through these words, Luke presents us with echoes from Isaiah.

Let’s leap forward in time to when Jesus is an adult. “What Does God’s Salvation Look Like?” Luke gives us a second response as Jesus begins his ministry at the synagogue in Nazareth.⁹ There Jesus unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to *proclaim* good news to the poor. He has sent me to *proclaim* release to the captives and the regaining of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to *proclaim* the year of the Lord’s favor.”¹⁰ Jesus is citing from Isaiah 61, our Old Testament reading. *This* is what salvation looks like! I suggest that this image of salvation might be a *surprise* to many; let me try to explain why.

¹ Luke 2:25, NIV, NRSV, NTE.

² Isa 40:1 (see also v5: “And the glory of the LORD *will be revealed*, and *all people* will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”). See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Here-is-Your-God.pdf> .

³ Luke 2:27.

⁴ Luke 2:29-32 (NLT, adapted). Simeon is described as righteous and devout; he was looking for the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. Indeed, it was the Spirit that guided him to the Temple that day; see Luke 2:25-40.

⁵ See also Luke 2:19.

⁶ Luke 2:10-11,17-18. I suspect that this was reassuring for Joseph too! (Luke *doesn’t* present us with Matthew’s details of dreams of angelic messengers to Joseph; Matt 1:18-25. In Luke’s account, they are still *engaged*; Luke 2: 5!)

⁷ The name “Jesus” has the same root as “Joshua,” meaning “God (YHWH) is salvation.”

⁸ See also Isa 42:6; 49:6.

⁹ Luke 4:16-21/30.

¹⁰ Luke 4:17-19, citing Isa 61:1-21 and 58:6. Luke then says, “Jesus said to them, ‘Today, this scripture has been *fulfilled* even as you heard it being read.’” After which, pandemonium broke out! (See Luke 4:20-30.)

“Salvation” is often understood to mean we are being “saved” *from something*, but what exactly is it? Is it from God’s punishment? Or from our own sins? From death itself? Each of these answers have, in different times and places, been emphasized within Christianity. For many Christians today, “salvation” means getting *into heaven*, which is to say that human beings are saved from God’s punishment by being in heaven, rather than hell, or from death – by being alive with God.¹¹ This view of salvation leads to an understanding of Christian mission as working to get as many people as possible *into* heaven! But that is *not* how Jesus understood his mission. He, following Isaiah, speaks of salvation resulting as a quality of life *here and now* that reflects God’s desire for justice and for wholesome human community. Yes, there will be much more to come at the end of time – and this was well understood in Jesus’ day. But salvation *begins now*, it’s not *just* for the future. That being the case, we need to emphasize that we are being saved *for* something - and not just *from* something! With that in mind, let’s look at Isaiah 61 with the view of getting a better understanding of salvation from his perspective.

Last week I introduced you to “second” Isaiah who was based in Babylon and who wrote chapters 40-55.¹² At the risk of causing some confusion, “third” Isaiah wrote chapters 56-66. He was based in Jerusalem following the *return* from the exile and was active after the city walls and the Temple had been rebuilt. This was an important beginning to Israel’s restoration, but it was just a start. The way forward would not be simple or easy. It is in this context that the voice of 3rd Isaiah rings out to the people, “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; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor.”¹³ This was God’s message to them at that time. Yet on closer inspection, we find that 3rd Isaiah was also looking back to God’s promises to 2nd Isaiah while he was in Babylon, and he then recycles and remolds that message for *his own day – just as the Gospel writers did for their times*.¹⁴ The prophet is being sent by God to proclaim good news for the victimized and the despairing – to all those who are brokenhearted.¹⁵ The message is one of release and liberty. And that liberty means *more* than just freedom; it involves a socio-economic reconfiguration of the community as a whole. The proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor” is a reference to the Jubilee year, something that was meant to occur every 50 years and resulted in debts being wiped away, slaves freed, fields allowed to rest, and the land returned to its original

¹¹ This is based on the (right) premise that neither sin or the devil have any place or power in heaven.

¹² FYI: The dates of the Babylonian exile are c. 597/587 (in phases) to 538 BC. “Second” Isaiah is thought to have written chapters 34-35, 40-55 from Babylon c. 540-537 BC. “Third” Isaiah arose *after* 537 BC, when some Jews returned back to Jerusalem from exile, and he wrote chapters 24-27, 56-66 from the homeland, i.e., after somewhat modest beginnings of Israel’s restoration in the land. (“First” Isaiah lived in Jerusalem c. 742-701/689(?) BC.)

¹³ Isa 61:1-2a.

¹⁴ In particular, he adapts the suffering servant poems/songs of 2nd Isa 42:1-4, (cf. 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). The identity of the “servant” has been much debated. Is it Israel personified (Isa 41:8-10)? Yes, however, Isa 42:1-4 could apply to an individual (e.g., 3rd Isaiah). This ambiguity may be intentional and is impossible to resolve. Since the faith community has also interpreted such passages as *messianic*, they can apply to an individual (Jesus; see Matt 12:17-21, where he cites Isa 42:1-4) who is seen as a representative of God’s people, i.e., “Israel” personified. Christians see that new community, the “new Israel,” as including non-Jews too.

¹⁵ See also Psalm 34:18; 147:3.

owner.¹⁶ Some of you may have noticed that Isaiah describes this Jubilee as “the day of vengeance for our God.”¹⁷ A better translation is “a day of *vindication*,” for God will restore the nation to wholeness and the world will - in turn - acknowledge Israel’s legitimacy.¹⁸ Consequently, mourning will be turned into joy; despair will become praise.¹⁹ Nevertheless, God’s “comfort” is much more than wiping away tears, it is establishing *a new beginning* – a new community, and a new way of living. Incidentally, this is also reflected in Luke’s portrayal of God’s new community, the Jerusalem church, in the Book of Acts.²⁰

After hearing the voice of 3rd Isaiah proclaiming that description of restoration, we then hear the voice of God who says, “I, the LORD, *love justice and hate wrongdoing*.”²¹ And the response of the prophet on behalf of the people is, “I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of *salvation*.”²² That same exuberance is present in the opening words of Mary’s Song, the Magnificat, which we heard earlier.²³ Again, “What does God’s *salvation* look like”? Isaiah says God’s *salvation and justice go together*, and Mary’s Song reveals *in practice* what that looks like: “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”²⁴ Like Jesus’ message at Nazareth, Mary reveals that God’s deliverance is real, for the here and now, and for those whom society forgets. That’s what God’s salvation looks like – and Isaiah would agree! Although Christians rightly see God’s promises as ultimately being completed at the end of time, we must *not* lose sight of the ways in which God’s salvation is meant to transform the world in the present. We are *not* to be so heavenly-minded that we are no earthly good! As I said earlier, we are being saved *for* something and not just *from* something! Jesus is inviting us to *participate* in this salvation, even in the middle of a world that is not yet fully redeemed.²⁵ That is why we, for example, give white Christmas gifts, it’s why we give to World vision and Presbyterian Sharing, why we participate in Compassion Amherstburg, and why we walk alongside the men at the Boarding House. I hope we can do even more of those kinds of things in the future. Jesus *doesn’t* speak about constructing a building, or set of Church programs, or forming a club for the like-minded. Instead, he calls us to be concerned about *the recipients* of the “good news” of the Kingdom of God, namely, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the prisoners, the mournful, and the faint of spirit. Such people will receive God’s comfort and blessing – that’s what we are told in the Beatitudes.²⁶ That’s why we are here!²⁷

¹⁶ See Lev 25:1–23; Deut 15:1–15.

¹⁷ Isa 61:2. The meaning of “vengeance” here is debated, it could be positive, as in “recompense” or “vindication.”

¹⁸ Isa 61:9,11.

¹⁹ Isa 61:3.

²⁰ Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16. (This is, I suggest, a theologically important Lucan perspective.)

²¹ Isa 61:8.

²² Isa 61:10a. NET: “For he [God] clothes me in garments of deliverance; he puts on me a robe symbolizing vindication.” Salvation is imaged both as a restored city and as an abundant garden – Isa 61:4, 11.

²³ Luke 1:46-47. Of course, the main connection of Mary’s song is Hannah’s song in 1 Sam 2:1-10.

²⁴ Luke 1:52-53. The mention of “his servant Israel” in v54 is noteworthy and, I suggest, echoes Isaiah.

²⁵ I have often mentioned the “now-and-not-yet” kingdom of God from the Gospels.

²⁶ Matt 5:1-12.

²⁷ And when we live and behave differently, the world will notice us as “people whom the Lord has blessed” – Isa 61:9. Recall too Jesus speaking about the final judgement (the “sheep and the goats,” Matt 25: 31-46) and the criterion being

“What Does God’s Salvation Look Like?” Our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 61 provides a job description and a mission statement concerning God’s intention for his people. The words spoken are of full of promise and reassurance. It contains themes of hope, peace, and joy that will arise when God’s justice and deliverance are realized. They are spoken to the people as a reminder that God has not forgotten them. We need to hear such words again in this pandemic. I often wonder what the “new normal” will look like. This tragedy is providing the world with a new opportunity to begin again, just as Jews began from scratch following the exile.²⁸ It is an opportunity to reconsider global economics, world debt, healthcare, welfare, employment practices, the environment, and the like. We have the prospect to ask ourselves tough questions pertaining to the structures and goals of society, so that our justice can reflect God’s priorities and not simply that of some political ideology. If we don’t take this chance, I suggest we will be walking further away from the path of God’s justice and salvation into the darkness, rather than moving toward the light. Even so, if we, like Simeon, have recognized God’s salvation in the face of Jesus, then let us proclaim that good news to all who will hear. And let us follow the example of Jesus and participate in God’s deliverance of our broken world as we wait for Christ’s coming. Amen.

acts of mercy, compassion, and justice. See: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/The-King-is-Coming.pdf> .

²⁸ And yet again, following the Holocaust.