

The Third Sunday of Advent – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony - 12-13-2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11, Psalm 126, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24, John 1:6-8, 19-28

Once again we hear the words of the Prophet Isaiah. “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, {the Lord} has send me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners;” Good news in these dark days of winter, of pandemic, of isolation and of anxiety about the days ahead. These words are spoken across the centuries directly to us, and they are words of salvation. We feel in many ways oppressed, brokenhearted, captive and prisoners by the circumstances of the last several months. Not in the ways traditionally thought of as those of which Isaiah spoke yet ways that long for healing good news as well. The good news we long for is news of salvation, the news of hope and an anticipated future on the horizon. An end to our current crisis and a return to something more akin to normal is not how salvation is customarily defined, but it is salvation here and now none the less. It comes to us as a blessing and gift of God through the efforts and creativity of many people. We are not passive recipients only, we are the agents of this aspect of salvation offered by God to us in this life. Not only does God promise salvation to human beings, human beings are also the ones who are charged and anointed to bring the good news of release, liberty, healing and community to those around us and beyond us to suffering in the world.

Last week we spoke of sin as self-deception and separation from God. We spoke of the restoration that is ours through God’s mercy and grace. These were the words of comfort brought by Isaiah and by John the Baptist. A way forward and out of desolation.

This week we focus on salvation. The poet and prophet known as Isaiah is defining for us what salvation might look like in our lives here and now. Salvation is the promise of eternal life after death and that is good news. But salvation is also the promises we hear from Isaiah, good news of liberty, healing, and release. It is good news of great joy. We are anointed by the spirit of God in this day and this time to receive the good news and at the same time to share that good news with those around us. This salvation here now.

In my early years, my family lived next door to another Christian family. They belonged to a denomination heavily focused on mission and salvation believing that Jesus would come again when everyone in the world heard the “message of salvation”. Salvation was important because it was in the context of an either/or choice for life after death. If you were “saved” you went to heaven if you were not then at death you went to eternal damnation. Salvation was accepting Jesus as a personal savior so that you would not go to hell. This family had a daughter in the third grade when I was in the second grade. We were friends and often played together. She went to a private Christian school. One afternoon she came over, and very seriously said that she had to talk to me. I still clearly remember the day. It was spring, warmish and sunny. We took a walk along the road that ran in front of our two houses. My friend began to tell me about heaven and what a wonderful place it was. There was all manner of good food, candy as much as we wanted, and all the toys we could ever imagine. The streets were paved with gold and nothing could ever harm us. All that was necessary for me to be assured of this wonderful place was to accept Jesus. It was where I would go when I died. This sounded wonderful, and of course it

is. Salvation is about accepting Christ as savior and knowing that in the words of our prayer book at death life is not ended but changed. That's what heaven is, all we can really know for sure and we accept it in trust and faith. We try to imagine it and describe it with what we know in this life. In my friend's third grade mind heaven was about all those things that she found most attractive, a kind of eternal Christmas. But even in the second grade, I somehow felt that something was missing. Then I did not know what that missing element might be. Over the years as I have studied, prayed and pondered about salvation, I have come to believe that salvation is much more far-reaching than what happens when we die, important as that is. Salvation is also about how we live now, knowing that the spirit of the Lord is upon us, anointing us to be the agents through which salvation comes into the world now. God is a God of wholeness, completeness, perfection. As such God cares about the whole of our lives, now, in the future and after death. Because God is a God of wholeness, salvation is both in this life and in the eternal life to come. The idea of an all-encompassing salvation offered to us in this life reflects what God wants for all of humanity, all of God's beloved children.

Isaiah described the life God wants for us, described in real terms heaven on earth for us. The prophet was speaking the good news to all who are oppressed, brokenhearted, captives and all the rest. Good news for all who are in some way not able to live in the fullness of the life that God created us to live. The salvation of God is meant to transform the world now in this time. For that to be a reality, we cannot simply sit back and wait for it to happen. For salvation to be in the world for all the children of God, requires that we take part and do our part in bringing about that salvation.

There is another name for this bringing about of salvation that is our work in the world. That name is mission. Salvation and mission go hand in hand, they always have done so. The mission of Christian people is to tell the good news but also to be the good news. Telling that good news has always been and still is easier than being that good news. We be the good news by our everyday actions and interactions with those around us. The purpose of mission is not to talk others into believing that God cares for them. The purpose of mission is to show others that God cares for them. We do that by our actions which truly do speak louder than our words. I love the quote attributed to St. Francis, "Preach the gospel always, when necessary use words."

As we move in the direction of regathering together as a church community there will be many opportunities for mission in this way. There are people who will emerge from this time in all of the ways described by Isaiah. Imprisoned by fear, captive to debt, brokenhearted because loved ones have died, and children who are not thriving; all of these are opportunities for mission for showing the love of God.

The salvation that we will be called upon to demonstrate is not far off in foreign parts, but in our own back yard. We are the ones, who having experienced God's love are asked by God to reach out and offer that love to others. It takes some courage and some risk to be the instruments of salvation. We might be rejected, we might be mocked but more likely we will be received gratefully. We will be received gratefully because we are genuinely offering caring help to someone we know.

The idea is that each one of us will reach out to someone we know who is in some way hurting, some way in need and together as a community of faith we will support one another in being the instrument of healing. You will not be alone in this work, God is with you as are the members of this community. When we are able to open our doors, we will be here for those you know and bring. Knowing and bringing are the first steps in mission. It will be the mission of this place in the days ahead. The motto I propose for us is that Each One Bring One. Each of us bring one other to this place so that together we may reach out to those around us and offer what we have found of value for ourselves in this community, St. Augustine's-in-the-Woods.

On your mark, get set, go. These are the words often heard at the beginning of a race. They are words for us today as we move toward a return to more normal times. We need to be on our mark, that is clear about how the mission we are called to is shaped and what our part, individually in that mission might be. It is essential that we get "set", prepared for the opportunities for ministry that are coming with the ability to gather again. It is vital that we be ready to go, to begin, to reach out when the ability to do so is offered to us. Get ready, get set, go, those words will define the next several months of the ministry of this parish. Get ready, get set, go.