

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
Advent III
By Eric Howell
Isaiah 61:1-4
December 14, 2008

Have you got all your Christmas shopping done yet? Have you put up all your decorations? Have you centered the tree just right? Have you wrapped it in lights? Have you hung the ornaments so that the kids won't knock them down? Have you put the lights on the outside of the house (or hired some creative entrepreneurs to do it for you)? Have you made a grocery list? Have you bought the groceries? Have you made travel plans? Have you cleaned the house? Have you wrapped presents? Have you made your online purchases so that there's time to have them shipped here in time? Have you hung the stockings with care? Have you made your Christmas Eve worship service plans? Have you made your charitable donations to church or Salvation Army or Christmas Child or the Red Cross or the Hunger Farm or Heifer International? Have you done everything? Because you know, it's eleven days away now. When you are seven years old, eleven days seems like an eternity. When you are thirty-five, eleven days passes like telephone poles whizzing past the window of a fast-moving train. Have you done everything there is to do for Christmas?

Christmas, the way it is often celebrated, is a lot about doing. At the end of the holiday, many of us feel like we need a vacation from our vacation. There's a lot to be done the way we do Christmas. But there's another kind of Christmas. I don't just mean a simpler, buy less / give more, reduce the number of presents, serve easy food Christmas. There's another Christmas entirely. It's the coming of the Messiah Christmas. The one that the twenty-four hour Christmas radio stations apparently have forgotten about. It's God's Christmas. It's remembering that this day is a looking back a long, long way at what people looked forward to for a long, long time.

It's God's Christmas and there's one major difference between the two. In our Christmas, we're the ones who do all the doing. We do it for the kids, for grandma, for a girlfriend, for those in need. In God's Christmas, God is the one at work. God does it all. The question is, who is it being done to and who is it being done for?

The passage from Isaiah this morning is an important and central prophetic passage of the coming of the Messiah. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." Who's it being done to and who's it being done for? The people in Isaiah's day would have known the answers to those questions easily. This passage would have been profoundly hopeful to them because it promised the coming of one on whom the Spirit of God rests and one who is anointed. That's the description of Messiah—the anointed one. And they needed a messiah. In exile, in trouble. They would have recognized themselves in the passage: "We are the poor, the brokenhearted, the captives, the

imprisoned. And the Messiah is coming to announce the time of God's favor for us and declare vengeance on the ones who made us poor, broke our hearts, captured and imprisoned us." The sad situation is going to be completely reversed. Turned upside down. It's a very satisfying hope. Good will come to us. Bad will come to them. And God, our God, will make it all happen.

The significance and centrality of this passage extends into the New Testament, where it is read by Jesus Christ. In Luke 4, Jesus is beginning his ministry. He's older, in his late twenties, a mature, grown man. But he's just now starting what is called his "public ministry". In his hometown of Nazareth, he goes to synagogue on a Sabbath. He is chosen to read scripture and is handed the scroll of Isaiah. He opens to the place he's looking for. Is it the lectionary text for the day? Did he pick this passage? Don't know, but he rolled the scroll intentionally to this passage in Isaiah, this prophesy of the day the Messiah would come and life would be turned upside down. The passage that represented in just a few beautiful, powerful lines the reversal that the people were looking for. God will give it to us; God will **give** it to them. Jesus, the hometown boy, the grown son of Joseph the carpenter, begins to read the passage with an urgency and directness not often achieved by public readers. You know most people are kind of nervous when they are standing in front of a room of people reading. You look out and see a sea of faces and your heart quickens a bit, your pulse races. Sometimes the words look a little blurry and your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth. Some people are really comfortable reading in public, but for some people, bless their souls, it's just hard. So when someone really struggles through a reading, give thanks for that person because you have no idea how hard it is. All our readers today did great. If you were nervous we didn't know it, but all of us have stood before a group and felt flushed.

I imagine Jesus standing before this group. He's not the rabbi. He's not a paid professional. He's a man with rough, workingman hands unrolling a scroll to read the passage for the day. But when he reads, he's the one who's calm and the congregation is flushed. It's their eyes that go crossed. It's their hearts that race. He's standing in the eye of a hurricane that he himself is stirring with the power of God's words. When he reads these words it's as if he's not reading someone else's words for someone else's time and place. It's as if he's reading words written for him and put on deposit centuries before for the moment he would stand and say:

"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 liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are being oppressed."

And then he rolled the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him as if he had something else to say to them. He did.

They were still waiting for the Messiah and still saw themselves as those identified by Isaiah as poor, brokenhearted, captured, imprisoned. The ones that put them there might be different. Rome now instead of Babylon. But they were still in the same situation and still looking for God's anointed one to come and rescue them. It wouldn't have been unusual for preachers to refer to this prophesy as a distant, ephemeral hope.

Someday God will send a redeemer to deliver us from this never-ending tragedy. Someday God will act in a powerful way to help those who are hurting, to free people who are in bondage, to comfort those who mourn. Someday God's promised messiah WILL come. And all shall be well. All shall be well.

Hope is a powerful thing, you know. You can lose just about everything, but if you still have hope, you can make it through the very darkest night. Faith is that part of us that sort of looks backward to things that happened a long time ago and we believe that those things happened and that they are still meaningful to us today. If we can think directionally, faith looks back. Love looks around. Love isn't really what happened then or what's going to happen. Love is the moment. It's now. It's the people next to you and the ones at home and the ones of Christmas morning. Sometimes love is not the people you know, but it's sometimes someone you don't know. Maybe it's a homeless person you feed and clothe, or a way you serve your community. Faith and love look back and look around. But hope, hope is about tomorrow. And if you still have hope in tomorrow, you can make it through today.

That sense of hope is central to what it means to be a Christian. Christianity is about looking backward to what happened in Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem two thousand years ago. It's about the implication of those events for our relationships with one another today. And it's about looking forward to the fulfillment of God's promises. At times and places when life is particularly hard, people find solace in these hopes, that they are not abandoned, they are not forsaken, they are remembered by a God who has power greater than our own and greater than the world's. A God who works all things for good for those who love him. When life is really hard, really, really hard, that's when hope holds you up. God was at work. And God is still at work in you and through you and for you.

Hope is the currency for people who are desperate. It's all you have when you've lost everything else. When you doubt your faith, when you don't feel love or feel like you have a capacity for love, you can cling to hope that your broken heart will be bound up, that your poverty will be redeemed, your captivity will be over, your shackles will fall off. This is the hope that preachers preached but it was usually qualified. Someday God will come. Someday God will do something about all of this. Someday it will all be better. Someday. Someday. Someday.

Jesus sits down and all the eyes that had seen the atrocities of their captors, all the eyes that had seen the pain and agony within themselves and within their families and nation, all those eyes in the room that had seen so much are on him waiting to see if he's still got something to say. He does.

“Today, this scripture is fulfilled.”

Remember the last scene of Willie Wonka's chocolate factory? Willie Wonka and the good little boy, Charlie, are floating in the magic elevator over the city and Wonka is giving the chocolate factory and all of its magic to the little boy. Wonka says, “Do you remember what happened to the little boy who got everything he ever wanted?” And every parent immediately mentally inserts, “Yes, he became a spoiled little snot who

terrorized his family and what few friends who tolerated him until he became a sad, lonely, bitter, selfish, old man.” But secretly we’d like to believe Wonka’s version about what happens to the one who gets everything he ever wanted, “He lived happily ever after.”

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

When we celebrate the coming of the Messiah, the fulfillment of this scripture, we are celebrating something God did, has done, and is doing still today.

You might think that would be greeted with unrivaled celebration. Happily ever after. But it wasn’t really. To their eyes, this carpenter’s boy didn’t fit what they’d been looking for in a messiah. Where were his white horse and chariot? Where were his sword and shield? Where were his crown and throne? What has he done? We are poor, brokenhearted, captured, and imprisoned by very real and very powerful circumstances in life. Where are your money, sword, crown, and army? And what he went on to say didn’t fit their ideas either. He went on to talk that day about how God’s work wasn’t just for them and against the outsiders and oppressors. But it was for the others, too. It’s not that God is for you and against them. God just draws a bigger circle. He even made it sound like he knew they were going to have a real problem with him. And they did, of course. They tried to throw him off a cliff.... But some didn’t.

Some didn’t reject him. They went on to listen to his teaching about how the poor are blessed and so are the poor in spirit. And they became generous. They heard him say that if a Roman soldier forces you to carry his pack, carry it an extra mile and they became forgiving. They saw him calm the wind and waves and they started believing. They heard him say if anyone would come after me, let him take up his cross daily and follow me. And they lived sacrificially. They heard him say, “This bread is my body and this cup is my blood.” And they began to understand that the Spirit of the Lord is on him and he is indeed anointed to bring good news to the poverties we all carry with us. His words bind up shattered hearts. His death frees all of us from the shackles of sin and separation from God and makes us want to live with righteousness and justice. They looked at his whole life from the unusual circumstances of his birth all the way to the terrible circumstances of his death and even to the amazing stories of his resurrection and they said, “It’s true. The scripture is fulfilled. The Messiah has come. God said he would do it. And He did.”