**Isaiah 61:1-4** January 27, 2019

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Epiphany 3

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Preaching Them Into Heaven**

We are nearly to the biggest advertising weekend of the year. You can’t help but notice that over the years advertisements have less and less to do with the actual product. You know what I mean, like an advertisement where an attractive person holds a spray can of air freshener. One puff and suddenly a two-dimensional black and white world turns into a 3D world full of color. Bored faces are turned into smiling faces. Skies are no longer cloudy, hunger in far off lands is satisfied and world conflict ceases. All from a can of air freshener. Ok. So they oversell it a bit.

In our reading, someone speaks a message. His message promises great things. His message speaks to the problems people have and says they will be solved! He says those people will have a new outlook and attitude about life, and in the end be restored what they lost. Is he overselling his message? Let’s listen to his message:

***Sermon Text***

*Isaiah 61:1The 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, 2to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3and 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. 4They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.*

**A. Who Is The Servant of the Lord?**

Who is this guy anyway, who claims to have this great message? Well, since it is in the book of Isaiah, we might assume it is Isaiah. Which wouldn’t be a bad guess. But the second half of the book of Isaiah is unique. Starting in chapter 42, we are introduced to a man called “The Servant of the Lord.” In chapter 42 Lord God introduces this servant, *“Here is my servant… my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”* This servant is the Messiah, the Savior. Our reading is part of twenty plus chapters where this Servant of the Lord does much of the speaking. And so in our reading, when it says, ***“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has appointed me to preach good news…”*** this is the Messiah speaking. Which all might seem kind of strange and you might wonder if your pastor is just looking for some sort of novel way to look at this Bible passage.

But something happened about 750 years after Isaiah. In our Gospel reading, remember Jesus preaching in Nazareth? In that first recorded sermon of Jesus’ ministry, he stood up in his local synagogue and started to preach. He started his sermon – very much like we start ours – by reading from the Bible. And the Bible passage he read for his very first sermon text was this exact reading. ***“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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*** But after reading the text, Jesus didn’t talk about Isaiah 61. Instead he said, “This is me.” (You can read that in Luke 4:21.)

Can you think of a more outrageous claim than that? A preacher opens the Bible and says, “This is talking about me”! Last year a televangelist made the headlines for all the wrong reasons when he told his flock that they needed to pony up and buy him a $54 million jet. But even that, even that!, is still a long way from holding up the Bible and saying, “This is about me.” God forbid that anyone should ever do such a thing!

But Jesus did. He claimed it. He said that today’s reading from Isaiah 61 was not about Isaiah, but about himself.

**B. Who Is He Preaching To?**

And this is what Jesus said about his mission: ***“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… to comfort those who mourn.”***

Oh, there are so many different things that people think they see in Jesus. But when Jesus gets up and preaches the first sermon of his life explaining why he is in this fallen world of ours, the first thing he says is ***“the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”*** This is *the* good news. Good news, not of social justice, not of feeding the poor, not of equality, but of a Savior from sin.

But people can’t abide by that. They want Jesus for political and social causes. To this day they point to Jesus’ own ministry: “Didn’t he feed the hungry and heal the sick? Didn’t he stand up to corrupt power structures?” Well, some of that at least. But the this-worldly focus was not the *focus* of Jesus’ ministry. Helping the poor is something Jesus did, but it was not why he came. If you take the three or four hours to read any one of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, you cannot help but notice that Jesus’ concern is for the spiritual brokenness of individuals. We are from birth spiritual prisoners to the devil, the sinful world and our sinful flesh. Jesus’ primary concern was always to get people right with God and into heaven.

So throughout his three years of ministry Jesus preached the good news. He would teach people to stop looking at themselves, feeling proud of what they had accomplished, and to instead cast their faith on him. He wanted them to be brokenhearted over their sins, to understand that each and every one of us is a prisoner of sin from birth. Because only in that realization can we appreciate the great gift he won for us by dying for our sins on the cross.

Are you willing to be counted among the people that Jesus has been sent to save, the people listed in Isaiah 61:1? Think about that question. Do you want to be numbered with them? Jesus says he came for the poor, the brokenhearted, the prisoners. “Well, yah, Jesus came to save those people too…” No you don’t get it. You are one of those people. The poor, the brokenhearted, the prisoners—put all those people in a room and you know what you have? Not a whole lot by the world’s count. You don’t have the bold and the beautiful, the powerful and successful. It is a different crowd whom Jesus claims when he begins his ministry. It’s a different crowd from those who walk the red carpet. Do you want to be one of them?

Many years ago, we shared a meal with a couple in another land. As we talked, the man told us something that bothered him as a Christian. They were moderately wealthy. He was a man of ability. He spoke of a frustration that he faced time and again in the work place. It was over how people looked at him as a Christian. They did not view his integrity as honorable, or his faith as making him virtuous. They habitually counted his faith as a crutch. They thought that he must need Jesus because he is too weak to stand on his own—and they told him as much. Now he was willing to admit that he needed Christ. But it rankled him how his peers not only rejected his faith, but were downright dismissive of his faith and him. To them his relationship with Jesus was not a strength, but a weakness. And that bothered him. Wouldn’t it bother you? Yet this is how it will always be in our self-promoting world.

Who was it that Jesus said that he came to seek and to save? The lost. He said, *“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”* And elsewhere, *“It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.”* The lost, the sinners, the sick. May God help us choke back that sinful pride that always wants to claim more for ourselves than that favorite hymn confesses, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

Yet when we, by God’s grace reconcile ourselves to this truth, we most love our Savior. This is what Christ was anointed to call us to.

**C. An Audience Transformed**

This will bring about a change. What does the broken heart feel when it finally learns to love again? What do the bereaved parents feel at the birth of another child? What does the prisoner feel when the sentence is complete and he walks out a free man? What does the organ donor recipient feel after taking the first steps on green grass?

In verse 3 the Servant of the Lord gives us an entirely new outlook: ***“The Lord has anointed me… 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 we understand that we have been restored to God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, it shows. Our appearance, our attitude, our words will be affected. God’s people have reason to look at the world differently. And God’s people have reason to look different.

Sometimes we look like everyone else in the world. No more joyful than anyone else, sometimes maybe even less so. But when it comes to crunch time, how often I see the change.

I see it and am humbled when a dear Christian passes away. What devastation. I mean, I want to cry and I didn’t know the person all that well. I didn’t know their favorite flavor of ice cream, the happiest moment of their high school days, which was the best family vacation they ever took. But you did. You knew all that and a lot more. And when you have said good-bye to those people who meant more than a depository full of gold, I have seen what I didn’t expect. I saw hope. But then I think about it and I know why. You know your Savior, and you knew that that person knew his/her Savior.

I get surprised when a Christian is struck with loss and they say, “It was only money.” Yes, but it was a lot of money! But they know where their real treasure is. And as the apostles in the second reading praised God in the midst of their persecutions, we realize that difficulties in the name of Christ do not mean God’s rejection but his acceptance.

Christ has given us, ***“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.”***

**D. What They Wait For**

In the closing verse of today’s text, God puts our reason for this unreasonable optimism in more concrete terms. ***“They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.”***

These words might call to mind of ruins of some ancient Greek temple. But that isn’t what this verse is about. It is something much more personal. Here the poetry of Isaiah appeals to something the Israelites knew about, something they had once possessed and then lost: their land of inheritance, the land of Israel. God says that Jesus brings that kind of restoration – the reinstatement of an inheritance, and more than that, a land.

Which is exactly how the last chapter of the entire Bible pictures it all. The last two chapters of Revelation are the fullest descriptions of heaven that you will find. And in the last it speaks of heaven in ways that remind us of another place. It speaks of heaven as a place with a river, and by that river is a tree that bears fruit, and that tree is called the tree of life, and there God will physically be with his people. Now if you are new to the faith, you might not get this, but if you have been a Christian a while that should sound familiar: river, tree, life, God’s presence. It sounds like the beginning, the Garden of Eden. And just maybe the great joy of Christ’s gift of heaven will not be that it is something completely new and different, but that it will be a restoration of what God first created for humanity, way back when our first father and mother walked with God in the cool of the day.

Christ said, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me… to preach good news to the poor… to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes… [and] they will rebuild the ancient ruins.”*** Lord Jesus, may it be so. Amen.