

**Make Straight**  
Rev. Nicole Farley  
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha  
December 11, 2011

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

- <sup>1</sup> 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;
- <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;
- <sup>3</sup> to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
- <sup>4</sup> They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.
- <sup>8</sup> For I the LORD love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
- <sup>9</sup> Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
- <sup>10</sup> I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
- <sup>11</sup> For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

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

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." <sup>21</sup>And

they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” <sup>23</sup>He said,

“I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’”

as the prophet Isaiah said.

<sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” <sup>26</sup>John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” <sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

What wonderful examples of witness we have in these readings. Filled with the spirit of the Lord, the prophet Isaiah sees clearly a call to reflect the goodness of the Lord by bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, proclaiming the year of the Lord, and comforting those who mourn. Surely if the oppressed receive good news then the light of God shines upon them. If broken hearts are healed, the light of God is shining through them. If captives and prisoners are free, then the light of God is all around them. If the year when all debts are wiped out has arrived, certainly the light of God can be seen by all. And if those who mourned mourn no more, the light of God has banished the darkness.

In his own way, John makes clear his form of witness, testifying to the light, so that all might believe through him. He baptizes and calls people to repentance so that they might be brought out of the darkness of sin and back into the light of God. When we think of how we fit into these narratives, how the stories of the Bible mirror our own stories, so often we see ourselves like the evangelists. We recall those times when we have responded to God’s grace by giving back to others, by sharing God’s love. We bring good news to the poor in the form of a meal served in love or a tree full of donated gifts; we comfort those who mourn, calling on them and offering the ministry of presence. Some visit those in prison, sharing friendship without judgment. Some welcome the strangers. Indeed these are true forms of evangelism, of sharing the good news and giving glory to God. Giving of ourselves keeps us from becoming wrapped up in ourselves, succumbing to greed and self-importance.

How often, though, do we recognize ourselves in the place of Zion receiving the good news of the prophet, in the place of those hearing John’s words and receiving baptism through his hands? We may think we don’t need to be evangelized to; after all, we’re already Christians - what would be the point? The truth is, as David L. Bartlett tells, that “All of us are Christians because we have been evangelized - have heard and believed the gospel.”<sup>1</sup> Part of our faith, of living in a community of faith, involves being evangelized to over and over again. Sure, I stand before you and do my best to share the good news *but*

---

<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 72.

I am far from the only one who does this. On the bulletin for my home congregation, the pastors are listed by name and the ministers of the church are listed as Wildwood Presbyterian Church. We are all ministers of the gospel; we *all* administer the good news.

Our friends in faith, as well as our friends outside of the church, testify to the light when they show us love. Maybe they call out of the blue just to say they are thinking of you or when they know times are tough. Maybe they listen to your words; maybe they listen to your silence. Maybe they hold you in their prayers, prayers for healing, prayers for wholeness, prayers for peace, prayers for well-being. Maybe they behave as the prophet, binding your broken heart, comforting you as you mourn, leading you to freedom from that which holds you captive. In so doing, they shine the light of Christ upon you.

On any mission trip or during any volunteer activity, I always made sure to remind the kids in my charge, and the adults, that we should not view our actions as those of the fortunate on behalf of the unfortunate. That perspective blinds us from seeing what we receive from those to whom we give. And so often, what we receive back far exceeds in spiritual value what we offer in monetary value. If we are not looking, what we miss in Appalachia and Cuba and inner city Washington D.C. is a joy in Christ which overcomes adversity. If we are not looking, we miss the intimate sharing of one's story and one's self. If we are not looking, we miss another's witness to the light of Christ shining in his or her life. If we see ourselves as evangelizing, we miss seeing how we are being evangelized to.

In this season, we often hear how it is far better to give than to receive. While this serves as a good reminder for children who have yet to learn that there is more to the holiday than receiving presents, it gives receiving a bad connotation. In an effort to keep us from becoming greedy or focused on ourselves, we are encouraged to devalue what is received. But, if you are making straight like I mentioned last week, if you are removing the obstacles to receiving Christ, then there must be value in receiving. In making straight a path for the Lord, you declare that you are ready to receive the light, and that includes receiving testimony to the light. Do not get so caught up in sharing the light that you miss the light which comes to you.

We tend to think of salvation as something yet to come; we sometimes pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done" as if such events will only signal Christ's coming again. Isaiah challenges us to recognize the glimpses of salvation which are present. Restoration for Zion is seen as very real, very tangible, and very close at hand - something to be enjoyed in this world. Renewal of relationship with God was something they needed not wait for. Receiving God's good news was meant to happen there and then. So, too, for us is God's inbreaking in this world here and now *and* yet to come. We are meant to receive the good news, as Christ child, as friendly voice, as another's faith through hardship, here and now, not just to give the good news.

Marcia J. Riggs eloquently says, “Believers have a responsibility both *to be* persons who reflect the light of Christ and *to live* in such a way that our lives proclaim the light of Christ in the world.”<sup>2</sup> In receiving the light others shine, we testify to light in another way. We may not know oppression by someone with power over us but we have, no doubt, had something weigh heavily upon us spiritually or mentally.<sup>3</sup> We become proof of God’s saving acts when we allow ourselves to hear good news and grant that it can be greater than that which weighs us down. Our lives become proof that God is tender when we release the pain of a broken heart, allowing God to begin to mend the wounded parts. We show evidence of God’s goodness when we let go and let God, accepting freedom from the thoughts and worries that hold us prisoner. We testify to God’s comfort and care when we make room for God’s promise of eternal life alongside our natural human grief in mourning.

If we witness to the light of Christ only through giving then our witness is incomplete. Until we can receive with humility the good news shared to us and for us, until we permit others to evangelize to us that we might receive the gospel anew and anew again, the light we share will only be partial. So in this time of Advent, let us open ourselves to give generously and receive humbly that we might fully reflect the light of God that shines upon us.

Let us pray: God of light, bless our giving and prepare us for receiving that our testimony to your goodness may be complete. Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 72.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/oppress>