

Third Sunday in Advent
"Lifting Us Out of Darkness"
Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
12/14/14

This Sunday and next Sunday, we are going to take a couple of weeks to focus on Advent and Christmas and so we take a pause from reading through the chapters of *The Story*.

But as I was preparing this sermon, I reflected on the fact that every Sunday, we can see connections between the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament and the New Testament are one story. And we can see that clearly in the three readings selected for today.

There is a theme running through all three of them. And so this morning, what I'd like you to do, is to take out your bulletin because we're going to look at several verses, first the Old Testament passage from Isaiah, and then from the passage in 1 Thessalonians.

So first of all let's look at the passage from Isaiah, chapter 61 and we're going to start by looking at the first two verses.

"The Spirit of the Lord 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,
and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn"

Where else have you heard these words?
Where else in Scripture do we find these exact words? Anyone remember?
Jesus! spoke these words.

In fact, when Jesus stood up to speak in his home synagogue in Nazareth, the scroll Isaiah was handed to him. And Jesus read from, and interpreted these words, because He was the fulfillment of this prophecy.

"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" Jesus said.

So, what we have here is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, speaking through the prophets to the people of Israel through Jesus, to the people of Nazareth and now to us today, through God's Word.

God was speaking to the people of Israel because they needed a word of hope They had just come through a period of 40 years of exile, 40 years of captivity.

And the prophets had been prophesying, that God would return His people to Jerusalem, to their home. But here, what we have at the end of Isaiah, is that the people have returned home and find that Jerusalem has been absolutely devastated.

It'd be like returning to the worst sections of New Orleans, after Katrina or like returning to your home after a wildfire had just burned it down, leaving only ashes.

Just picture what a conquering army would do to a city.
because that's what they found when they got back to Jerusalem.

All their hope and their longing to return to their homes, had been met with bitter disappointment. And they needed to hear a word of hope. And so the Holy Spirit speaking through the prophet Isaiah brings them these words of hope in verse 3:

“The Lord will provide for those who mourn in Zion...in Israel –
to give them the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise, instead of a faint spirit.”

This morning in the children's sermon I talked about what it's like when you only see darkness. And the time when we need hope, the most is when we can't see any light. At these times we may be looking, but we have been blinded by a tragedy or a loss, and we can't see any evidence of God's light.

It's kind of like something I experienced on a bike trail in southern Wisconsin. We were visiting my folks, and we spent a day on a real nice bike trail, built on an abandoned railway.

And this railway, included some tunnels that you walk your bike through. You have to walk it through, because, the tunnels are so long, that when you enter them, you can't see any light at the other end.

Now sometimes we go through a period of trial that is relatively short, and we have hope, because we can see light at the end of the tunnel.

But this bike path reminded me that sometimes, we go far enough into a trial, that even the light from behind us begins to grow dim. And when you can't see any light behind you or in front of you, and you can't see any light behind you, that's when we're tempted to lose hope.

Maybe that's what the people of Israel felt like. Returning to Jerusalem was their light at the end of the tunnel. That was their hope. And yet when they got there all they found was more darkness.

And sometimes our lives are like that.

Some years are like that. We can see that right here in our own congregation every week when we remember friends and family members in our prayers.

Sometimes it's the darkness of cancer, or illness, or injury,
Other times, it might be the darkness of conflict in a family, or a situation at work, that makes facing each Monday like entering a dark tunnel.

Here we are in a season that brings such a mixture of feelings for so many people.
As the days grow shorter and colder, many are filled with the grief of lost loved ones.

So it's precisely into situations like these that the prophet Isaiah, brings a word of hope this morning. Let's look at verse 8 together:

In verse 8, the Spirit of God speaks through Isaiah and proclaims:

“For I the Lord, love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense... their reward,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.”

The promise that God gave to Abraham will continue through the people of Israel and He promises that

“their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; and all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.”

So what we have in the Old Testament, is not just the Creation story, and the 10 commandments, time and time again we have God's promises given to Israel.

And now in response to God's promise we hear the people responding in verse 10:

“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.”

So, their response to God's promises and God's faithfulness is rejoicing, their response is worship. In spite of their circumstances God fills their hearts with righteousness and praise.

And that's the connection to our 2nd Reading from Thessalonians.

Paul is writing to a people who are also experiencing a period of darkness.

Some are being persecuted for their faith.

Some who had hoped to see Christ return in their own lifetime were losing hope.

And so Paul, brings them this word of encouragement:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances;

for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

You might be wondering, “Does Paul really mean for us to rejoice, in all circumstances? Even when we’re in the middle of a long tunnel, and we can’t see any light?”

The key for Paul, and remember he was a man who saw plenty of darkness in his own life, the key for Paul comes in verses 23 and 24.

“May the God of peace himself, sanctify you entirely and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And here’s the promise: “The one who calls you is faithful and **he will do this.**”

Our efforts to climb our way out of darkness...
our efforts to be more like Christ will ultimately fall short
but the Lord Himself will do this! Jesus living in you will do this!

Isn’t that an amazing promise?

The Holy Spirit is speaking through the prophets in Old Testament and through Paul in the New Testament, and John the Baptist, all pointing us to the light of Christ.

Who will lift us out of the darkness? The One who is faithful will surely do this! Amen.