

Redemption Celebration

sermon digest

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

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In 1947, when the Isaiah scroll was found in a cave near the Dead Sea by Bedoin shepherds, the discovery was revolutionary for both Jews and Christians. Isaiah is more central to both Jewish and Christian theology than any other Prophet. The scroll was 1100 years older than the most ancient Isaiah texts available at the time. The New Testament contains 590 citations from sixty-five chapters of Isaiah. It was obviously a favorite scripture from Hebrew tradition at the time of Christ and the early church. No wonder that we find ourselves reading from Isaiah during Advent.

Our indebtedness to Judaism is deepened by the coming of Christ. We are reminded that the good news of Jesus in the Gospels is wrapped in Judaism. The long wait for God to redeem his people Israel is reflected both in the anxiety of the Exile and in the redemptive hope of reconstruction after the Exile of sixth century Jews. The hope for God to act in world crisis is more about them than about us, more about Jewish expectation than Christian hope. Advent reflects the New Testament message that Christian salvation always passes through Jewish expectation. Few people in history could identify more than the Jews with the word of hope for the oppressed or brokenhearted or liberty for prisoners.

The meaning of the message is in the situation of the reader. Have you been to jail lately? Lay aside the stigma we normally associate with jailbirds. Gretchen Pritchard (*Christian Century*, Dec. 1, 1993) notes that most prisoners in the Bible are political prisoners, not criminals or convicts. They are the good guys put away by tyrants. They are threat only to evil in the world.

Isaiah's call to celebration was addressed to a people returning from fifty years of Babylonian captivity. The announcement of good news was for the victims of alienation from their homeland, for people who had experienced deprivation as captives in a foreign country. This was homecoming. Redemption meant return to a new day in an old place. Every generation of Jews carried with them the anxiety of alienation and the hope of homecoming into the context of their own situation in life. The prophetic hope was written for Exiles on the day of their arrival back in Jerusalem. Taken from the original context, the promised release of prisoners might not sound like good news to us. Unless you count yourself among the captives, you probably are not too interested in a messianic emancipation. I doubt that we could get very excited about opening the gates of Brushy Mountain prison. We would just as soon leave the criminals behind bars. Most of us cannot begin to identify ourselves with prisoners, but the Exiles did, and so did the folks in Nazareth under Roman domination.

In Luke 4, the Isaiah message takes on a slightly different meaning. Fresh out of the wilderness of temptation, the young carpenter strides into Nazareth, his hometown, and on the Sabbath enters the local synagogue. Luke qualifies the event by the simple statement: "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit returned to Galilee." On the surface, nothing about this scene is unusual. Jesus normally attended services at the synagogue, and I suspect he had often read from the ancient scrolls, but Luke reminds us that this ordinary Sabbath was anything but ordinary. Jesus was different. There were rumors, and the gossip may have brought out the rubbernecks on the Sabbath. "Have you heard about Mary's boy? Thinks he's a rabbi or a prophet. He has been to several synagogues in Galilee, and I hear he is in town."

When Jesus stood up to read the scriptures, he was handed the Isaiah scroll, and he read our passage. This was a favorite text for Jews under Roman oppression. Everyone recognized the messianic promise, and Jesus might have done well to stop while he was ahead. But he offered an interpretation, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Then, to compound the offense, he cited the moments in scripture when revelation had come to Gentiles. Wasn't he aware that Gentiles were the problem? Roman Gentiles had bullied the Jews into a state of poverty and oppression that could only be compared to the age of Exile. The people were livid! The celebration of the prophetic promise of the hometown boy suddenly turned to anger, and the community turned into a lynch mob.

James Sanders (*Interpretation*, April, 1982,p. 154) explains the rage: "Jesus was saying to the congregation that God was not a Jew." His statement was akin to standing on a street corner in modern Jerusalem

and preaching that Messiah will come to release the Palestinians from Jewish oppression or that God will save the world from American materialism or that God will prevent Christian world domination. Can you imagine your pastor saying from the pulpit that Christians are the problem?

Name your prison. Father Daniel Berrigan was a Catholic priest who with the Trappist Monk Thomas Merton and his brother Phillip formed an interfaith coalition against the War in Vietnam. Both of the Berrigans served prison sentences for non-violent protests of the War, but they did violate laws, and for awhile Daniel was a fugitive from the law. He was finally captured by the FBI and sentenced to three years in prison. Fresh out of prison, he spoke at the seminary near my church in 1974. I was surprised by Daniel's casual comment that many of the prisoners he met were less threatening to society than the people who had put them there. He thought that the best thing we could do for the safety of the world was to set the prisoners free. He took the meaning of Isaiah's message to apply to all prisoners. Prison was the problem, not the solution to the world's evil.

Having been in prison, Berrigan was aware of the harm done to people put away from society, locked up like animals, and concentrated in dense populations where criminal mentality is the norm and where violence is learned behavior. We sometimes forget that Jeremiah, Jesus, and Paul were prisoners of conscience and that the world is full of innocent people who have been thrown in jail or worse to silence controversial opinions. As we speak, all over the world people are under arrest because of controversial points of view that they voice in the public square. I can't help but believe that they are included the promise of Christ.

Yet, all of us are jailbirds of one kind or another. Steel bars, prison uniforms, and armed guards are identified with the typical prison where dangerous people are locked away and out of the reach of their victims. The rest of us are behind other kinds of bars like memories from childhood, addictions to chemicals and foods, trapped in bodies that do not work the way they were designed, and captives of bigotry and prejudice. Remember, Christ has come to set prisoners free.

Celebrate liberation. During Advent we sing Charles Wesley's hymn, "Come, thou long expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free; From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in Thee." Black Americans and early Baptists saw themselves in the mirror of the Exodus from Egyptian slavery. People who feel oppressed listen for a gospel of freedom that most of us cannot understand. In Latin America political and economic injustice had created an enormous underclass dominated by the wealthy elite. Liberation theology emerged in the 1960's with Roman Catholic priests who saw the connection between the liberation of the oppressed in the coming of Jesus and the fight for economic and political justice in their world.

The point is as clear as it is simple. The message of Advent is for all who are oppressed. The problem rests with those who think that they are justified in oppressing others, that they deserve to be rich, that God's blessing can be measured in bucks. Jesus came to reach the people at the bottom of the social ladder—people of acknowledged need. People of privilege, power, and position are misfits at Advent. The universal application of Isaiah's message is in the divine search for justice in the world. The poor and the oppressed are always preferred over the powerful and the privileged. God is always attracted to need.

The Faces of Jesus is a collection of art from around the world, including some drawings from children, depicting the life of Jesus. Every race and culture imagines the Christ in their costume with features characteristic of their people. Frederick Buechner provides the narrative for the colorful art photos. He notes that we have no description of Jesus, no sketch from the New Testament. The only portrait of Jesus from the Gospels is a reflection in the faces of the witnesses, and all that we have is the human imagination in centuries of art. Buechner suggests that we look at the face of Jesus, "as the face of our own secret and innermost destiny: The face of Jesus as our face." The beauty of this book is the shocking variety of views and images of Jesus. You begin to get the impression that the Christ who came to his own people comes to each of us in our own time and place. Christ transcends every artistic image. God is never captive of any culture, any epoch, or any place.

I recall the humor with which my history professor described the art glass window in the local African-American church near our campus. There in full color was a black Jesus. Why in the world would these poor blacks assume that they had a right to picture Jesus in their image? But, truth be

told, they were closer to the truth than the rest of us. The good news is for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives and prisoners.