



THREE POSSIBILITIES FOR A SERMON ON JOY – ISAIAH 61:1-4, 8-11

The Third Sunday in Advent

By: Reverend Brandee Jasmine Mimitzraiem

This third Sunday of Advent, as with the season, finds us in a triffecta of pandemics (global outbreaks of a contagious infection - infectious ideas, infectious diseases, infectious actions, infectious sin): kyriarchy, HIV/AIDS, and COVID-19. The first, kyriarchy, is centuries old. It is the struggle to be supreme, to be lord over all. It is the root of white supremacy, of misogyny, of heterosupremacy, of cismativity, of ableism, and ageism. The symptoms include anti-Blackness, body policing, the destruction of trans people, state murder of homosexual people, barriers to accessing worship, the discarding of senior citizens, the marginalization of everyone who doesn't fit the image of the human being who desires to known as *kyrios* or lord. The second pandemic, HIV/AIDS, is 40 years old. It increased marginalization and shame, it tore families apart, it left children orphaned. Then we became accustomed to it. We stopped paying attention, stopped counting the dead. We even stopped including it on the list of pandemics. The third pandemic, COVID-19, is shiny and new. It's still not quite known, quite understood. It's scary. It produces anxiety. It has caused us to change the way we live, interact, and even worship. We do not know what will happen next. We do not know if there will be an "after." We do not know. It has destabilized us. We are left uncertain and unsure.

In Advent, in the midst of this triumvirate of global infections, we look for what to expect. We turn to **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11** to see how to expect joy.

“(1) 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; (2) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; (3) 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. (4) 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.” --- --- “(8) For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; [a] I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. (9) 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. (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, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. (11) 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.”

Advent is a coming or an arrival. In the Christian calendar, it is the expectation that God will show up and show us who God is. In this text, God does just that. In the first verse, God’s spirit falls upon the prophet. It apprehends him - taking hold and commanding that he speak. In verse 8, God speaks and tells us who God is and for whom God is concerned. God reveals God.

There are three speakers, here, and three audiences. The prophet speaks, first, of his own experience of God and of what he has been compelled to do. His audience is both the people of God (you) *and* those who oppress God’s people (they). God speaks, next, of God’s own priorities and then of God’s actions. God’s audience is the prophet and both groups of people. Finally, in v10, the people of God respond. We can assume this response is directed to the prophet or to other people as it is an affirmation of hearing the speech of God and the Prophet earlier in the chapter.

Thus, we have 3 different possibilities for Advent sermons in this text.

1. Focusing on the Prophet
2. Focusing on the People of God
3. Focusing on God’s self-disclosure

Say So

In the first option, we get to join in with Jesus and a multitude of voices who echo this refrain of pneumatological prophetic profession. God's presence requires a human response. God shows up and the prophet is required to speak in response. The Spirit of God makes manifest God's will and the word is irresistible. It must go forth. The prophet cannot control it. The prophet cannot decide what it is or to whom they speak. The Spirit of God pushes the prophet forward, in service to the people of God, carrying God's word. That word is too powerful to be controlled by humans, to be manipulated by institutions, to be opposed by the powerful. God said what God said. And the prophet must say so.

In this sermon, we connect the power of divine utterance and divine action with the responsive action of human speech. We lean into the expectation that God's speech, as heard through the prophet, will be fulfilled. This sermon is an opportunity to encourage anticipatory joy. We can encourage the anticipation of God speaking, of a new word for us in this era, of being held firmly in the grasp of the Spirit. This sermon, too, is an opportunity to preach about God's spirit descending into human history and displaying God's glory. It's a chance to tease the incarnation, building suspense for the joy of the incarnation.

In this sermon, we have the opportunity to include the people's response to hearing the good news of the incarnation: joy. We can use the people's response to the prophet as prompt for speaking of the joy with which we should respond when we hear God's word. We can trace the need for human response to divine action from the prophet to the people. This sermon gives us the opportunity to encourage the people of God to whom we preach to "say so": to declare what God has said, to declare knowledge of God, to declare their joy, to declare what they expect from God in this season of Advent, and to declare their praise.

Bipartisan Joy

In the second option, we see the people of God a generation removed from exile. The rich and powerful, who were in exile, have returned home to reclaim their titles, their land, and their power. The poor and powerless who were too irrelevant to be taken into exile and who always maintained their culture, their land, their faith are struggling to understand the cultural synchronization that took place in Babylon. They're reticent to be ruled over by a less-foreign but still-not-like us force. They

don't understand why reconstituting the artifacts of faith is less important than consolidating rulership. Both groups understand themselves as the people of God. But who is right? Who maintains leadership? How does the community move forward?

They both hear God speak.

For the people of God, God's word is good news. It's a sign of coming relief. God reveals God's self to be caring, compassionate, and concerned about the human condition.

For those who oppose the people of God, God's word is bad news. God reveals that God is aware of their behavior, attentive to the cries of the oppressed, and active in the world.

This sermon is tricky. It requires us to hold in tension two truths: 1. our expectation that we are God's chosen and 2. the reality that God sees how we treat people. In this sermon, we cannot choose to identify solely with one group or the other. We are both the mourners and those who cause grief. We are both the captives and captors. We are both the recipients of the word of freedom and those who stand in the need of God's grace. We are both those who are sinned against and those who are sinners. We stand in need of the promise of liberation and the promise of being forgiven when we liberate others. In this sermon, we are reminded of our own positions of privilege and marginalization. We can promise freedom and warn those who block freedom to heed the word of the Lord. That's the tension of this text.

The possibility for joy is in the tension. As marginalized, we hear the joy of freedom. As privileged, we hear the joy of forgiveness. But the word of joy in this text is for the entire community: when the privilege use their privilege to bring the marginalized to the center, the glory of the Lord is seen among us all. We reach the expectant joy of seeing God's glory when we do justice. This sermon gives us more than a hint of God's grace. It's an opportunity to connect grace and the incarnation: the spirit of God falls, those who are oppressed are liberated, those who did oppress no longer do, God's glory is seen, in doing justice we receive grace.

He Said What He Said

The third option focuses on God's speech as God's act. It moves beyond focusing on the human responses. Throughout the book of Isaiah, God has been on a rollercoaster of emotions. God's

people are sinning against God. God pleads and begs for them to behave. God threatens and warns. And the people of God do what they wanna do. God watches as they're overtaken by Persia and Persia is overtaken by Babylon. God delivers them home. And, here, we find God still speaking. We find God declaring to the people, again, who God is. God declares that God is present, "descending" to speak through prophet. God declares that God sees their predicament, naming their pains one by one. God declares that God fixes what is broken - their hearts, their communities, their relationship with God. God declares that God restores even those places and things that seem impossible to restore. Though these declarations are made in the future tense of human action, they are divine promises. They are rooted in God's stated preferences: God loves justice. God hates robbery with a burnt offering. God saves God's people and God vindicates us. When God speaks, God declares who God is.

In this text, then, God reveals God to us. God declares who God is. We learn that God's being is evident in God's promises for how we will act, what we will receive, what we will do. We learn that God is God *for* us: in relationship with us, acting among us, moving on our behalf, concerned about us, feeling a ways about what we do and how we do. God is our God. And we are God's people. This sermon gives us the opportunity to announce that we are known to God. In this sermon, we can provide assurance that God is keenly aware of our predicament and has a plan for what to do in the midst of it and after it's over. We can connect our present predicament with the promises of God to the people in Isaiah and with the promises of Advent.

This sermon moves us beyond our feelings about God, beyond our concerns about our predicament and helps us to see God. We can move the people into an understanding that God always does what God says. We have, here, a sermon of expectancy of divine action. We can encourage the people to consider their personal circumstances and then to hear how God has declared that God will intervene within them. We can connect the promises found in this text with God's promises found throughout the Bible. In this sermon, we can build upon previous seasons, connecting Advent to discussions about the election, or sermons over the summer. This is an opportunity to both remind the people of what God has done and help them to expect God's continued movement.

This sermon gives us the opportunity to engage the underlying theology of Advent: God gives us knowledge of God. We get to know God because God shows up and tells us who God is. We can

believe what God says about God because God truly knows God. In engaging the theology of Advent in this sermon about God declaring God's love for justice, about God declaring that God delivers and saves, we have the opportunity to suggest knowledge of God as a coping mechanism for the anxiety of the times. By focusing on what we know about God, we are able to be still and just know. We can assure the people that God is faithful and steadfast and can be expected to be just who God says God is.

The tricky part of this sermon, I think, will be to connect God's declarations with God's act. Karl Barth says, "God's speech is God's act." For preachers whose theologies fall in line with Barthian theology, that will be an easy line to draw. For others, "God said God will, I believe it" and pointing to the need to both wait and expect as though it is done will help make the point, here, that God's speech and act show us who God is. The promise, here, though is one of immediate expectancy and immediate joy. The transition from God's declaration of what will happen to it happening, in this text, is not a "how long." It's an immediate choice that God makes and it happens as God says it. (We know because the immediate response is joy.) The goal here isn't "wait on the Lord" but "trust God to be God."

All three sermons provide the opportunity to connect our experiences of the triad of pandemics to the joyful expectation of God's presence among and with us. In each sermon, we can point to Jesus, point to God's grace, point to salvation, and declare joy. The trio of pandemics do not have the final say. The Trinity, God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, speaks wholly and finally for us and to us. And that word that is spoken is a word of hope, of peace, and of joy. Prepare your hearts. And preach the joy of God.

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