

REJOICE IN JESUS' SALVATION

Isaiah 61:1-11

Third Sunday in Advent (Series B)

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The Old Testament lesson for the Third Sunday in Advent comes from *The Prophet Isaiah*, chapter 61, verses 1 through 11. In this Old Testament lesson, our Savior gives us reason to rejoice. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Isaiah 61, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

- 1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
- 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 grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.
- 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.
- 5 Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks;
foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;
- 6 but you shall be called the priests of the LORD;
they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
and in their glory you shall boast.
- 7 Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion;
instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot;
therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion;
they shall have everlasting joy.
- 8 For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

REJOICE IN JESUS' SALVATION (Isaiah 61:1-11)

- 9 Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed.
- 10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
- 11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

The word of the day is “rejoice.” The Church calendar is designed so that every year the third Sunday in Advent has this same theme: Rejoice! There’s one particular verse from the readings today that captures this. It makes a pretty good theme verse for today. It’s 1 Thessalonians 5:16: “Rejoice always.” That’s it. That’s the whole verse. I think we should try to memorize it. Are you with me? “Rejoice always.” Now you try to recite it: “*Rejoice always.*”

But we can’t stop there. Sometimes Christians stop there. *Rejoice always! The Bible says, “Rejoice.” So rejoice!* It’s like the only reason to rejoice is that God tells us to do it.

Christian music does this sometimes. It’s one of the things to be careful for. Some songs are a lot of praise without giving much of a reason why. Praise must always be based on the work of God. And the work of God must always remain central. If our praise takes over as the main thing, it, ironically, becomes worship of ourselves.

And it’s not just in music. We can even do this to ourselves when we’re reading a verse like 1 Thessalonians 5:16: “Rejoice always.” Memorize it. Great. But if that’s the only thing we know from 1 Thessalonians, it falls flat. Paul doesn’t say, “Rejoice always,” in a vacuum. *Paul, to the Thessalonians. Rejoice always! Amen.* That’s not how it goes. He says it at the end of a letter filled with doctrine. Most especially, he’s taught the Thessalonians about the return of Christ, and how the dead will be raised, and we as believers will be with Christ and the entire Church for all eternity. This is one of those teachings, where, if we actually stop and think about what God is promising to do for us, we can’t help but praise him.

Scripture instructs us to rejoice. And that would be enough reason to rejoice. If God tells us to rejoice, without giving us any reason why, we would be obligated to obey him as a matter of Law. But God’s not like that. He gives us reasons to rejoice. Praise is based on the Gospel, not the Law. What I mean is, we don’t rejoice because God tells us to rejoice. We rejoice because God gives us reasons to rejoice.

Imagine some guy is running down the sidewalk shouting, “Rejoice! Rejoice!” So you stop him and say, “Hey, what happened?” And he says, “Oh, nothing; I just like being happy.” So you say, “Oh, okay,” but you probably don’t join him, because that’s kind of weird. But suppose the guy says, “We found a cure for death!” Well then, if you actually believe the guy, you probably

start rejoicing. It would be weird not to. Scripture is not the weird guy telling us to rejoice for no reason. Scripture is the guy proclaiming that Jesus is the cure for death.

We hear this kind of proclamation in the Old Testament reading from Isaiah 61.

One of the things Isaiah is known for is what we call his “Servant Songs.” The most famous one is in chapter 53. That’s the one about how Jesus has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows (53:4). And, “Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter ... so he opened not his mouth” (53:7). Some people say there are only four Servant Songs (42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). Others say, and I think I agree with them, that Isaiah 61:1-3 is the fifth Servant Song. It has all the characteristics of the other Servant Songs, except one: it doesn’t have the word “servant” in it. But other than that, the style and content of it is very similar. It sounds a lot like the other four.

Most significantly, it’s about the Messiah. And, not only that, but the Messiah is the speaker. We see this with the word “anointed.” “Messiah” is simply the Hebrew word for “Anointed One.” And the Greek word “Christ” also means the same thing. This would be an odd thing for a prophet to say about himself, because prophets were typically not anointed in the Old Testament. I could only find one instance where a prophet was anointed (Elisha; 1 Kings 19:16). It was kings and priests who were anointed to their offices. So when Isaiah writes,

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me” (61:1),

he’s not writing for himself. He’s recording the words of someone else. And Hebrew poetry often works this way. It goes in and out of quoting someone else without announcing a change. The prophet will speak, then the prophet quotes the LORD, then he goes back to his own words. And sometimes he goes back and forth without announcing a change. In English we would say, “I said ... and then the LORD said ... and then I said.” But Hebrew doesn’t always do that. Sometimes the prophet just breaks into the words of the LORD, and we figure it out from the content of what the LORD says. And that’s what happens here. Isaiah is recording someone else’s words.

And that someone else is Jesus. Jesus is the Anointed One—the Messiah—the Christ. If we used red letters in the Old Testament, verses 1 through 3 would be in red. These are the words of Jesus. Jesus confirms this when he quotes this passage, concerning himself, in *The Gospel of Luke*. There’s this incident where Jesus goes to his hometown of Nazareth. And on the Sabbath day he goes to the synagogue as the guest preacher. They hand him the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolls it and reads these verses from chapter 61. Then he sits down—they sat down to preach in the synagogues—and he says, “**Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing**” (Luke 4:21). In effect Jesus says, “Isaiah prophetically recorded my voice when he wrote this.” So when we read Isaiah 61, we’re reading an announcement from Jesus.

Jesus comes to bring good news to the poor. He binds up the brokenhearted. He sets the prisoners free. He proclaims the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of God’s vengeance. He comforts those who mourn. He declares sinners to be “oaks of righteousness.” Some of this we see fulfilled in the beatitudes from Matthew 5. That’s where Jesus says, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit ... Blessed are those who mourn ... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness**” (Matt. 5:3-4, 6). I think Jesus had Isaiah 61 in mind when he preaches that. He was certainly fulfilling it.

There are so many beautiful themes in these verses. Good news to the poor. Binding up the brokenhearted. Liberty for the captives. The year of the LORD’s favor. Comfort for those who

REJOICE IN JESUS' SALVATION (Isaiah 61:1-11)

mourn. Exchanging ashes for a beautiful headdress. Praise instead of a faint spirit. And he calls sinners righteous. But these aren't really different things. Everything Jesus proclaims here is the same thing. They're all different ways of describing his salvation.

The main theme here is "liberty to the captives." And it's closely connected with "the year of the LORD's favor." "The year of the LORD's favor" is an occasion that sets the captives free. I'll explain what I mean, but we'll have to use our Way Back Old Testament Machine. And I know, we're already in the Old Testament. Isaiah prophesied around 700 BC. But we're going to go back to about 1445 BC. Israel had just come out of Egypt, and God was giving them laws concerning how they should live and worship and how their nation was to be governed. One of the things God commanded them to observe was the Year of Jubilee. This is in Leviticus 25. God commanded Israel to observe this Year of Jubilee every fifty years. It was a Sabbath year. That is, they weren't supposed to plant any crops. It was a rest for the land. They were to live off of what God had already provided for them. But most importantly, it was a year of release. If someone had sold their land, ownership was to be returned to them at the Jubilee. So they couldn't really sell their land forever. They were to calculate the sale price based on how many years were left until the Jubilee. When Israel took possession of the Promised Land, each family received a portion of land, and God's will was that this land would stay with the family. It was a gift, so God didn't allow them to sell it permanently.

The same law applied to slavery too. And I should state that slavery then wasn't really the same thing as what we had in the United States. It wasn't a racial thing. Rather, it was more of a bankruptcy system. If you ran out of money, or got so far in debt that you couldn't work your way out, you might have to sell yourself as a slave to pay off your debt. You lost your freedom and whatever property you had left, but at least you had work and food. This somewhat voluntary kind of slavery was very common in the ancient world. It was a necessary evil. But God gave the Israelites this Jubilee law to set an endpoint to slavery. You might be a slave for one year or forty-nine years, but you and your family would not be slaves forever. At the year of Jubilee you got your freedom and your land back.

As the name "Jubilee" suggests, this was a year of jubilation, or rejoicing, in the LORD's gifts. The Jubilee law protected God's gifts of life and property. But it really did something more. Like every good thing in the Old Covenant, it was a prophetic shadow of Jesus Christ. It looked forward to the eternal restoration and freedom he would bring.

This is what Jesus means when he says through the prophet Isaiah,

"The LORD has anointed me ...
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor" (61:1-2).

Jesus is speaking of the Year of Jubilee, but he's not talking about Israelites restoring each other's land or releasing them from slavery. He's talking about something much, much bigger. He's talking about restoring to us our inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven and releasing us from our slavery to sin and death. He's talking about restoring what was lost when our first parents, Adam and Eve, sold the human race into slavery by the fall into sin. The devil tempted them, and they traded our eternal inheritance for bondage to sin and death. So Jesus comes to restore God's creation, and release us from bondage.

Bondage, or slavery, is one of the biblical ways to talk about sin. I don't think it's the most common way we think of it though. Sometimes we think of sin as mistakes we make. But this is too weak. More biblically, we might think of sin as rebellion against God. This is much better,

REJOICE IN JESUS' SALVATION (Isaiah 61:1-11)

because it recognizes our guilt. When we break the commandments, we're not just making mistakes, but we are rebelling against the creator and ruler of heaven and earth. This is a biblical way to think about sin. But another biblical way is to see it as bondage or slavery. And I think we don't really like this one. It actually offends us more than the idea of rebellion, because if sin is just rebellion, and nothing more, then we think we can fix our status before God by just not rebelling anymore. *Oh, so Adam and Eve rebelled? They went to the wrong side, and they took us with them? Well I'll just march back over to the right side.* Now sin is rebellion, but if it's *only* rebellion, then we could just end the rebellion by surrendering. But sin is also bondage. We are slaves to the rebel side. Because you can't, you won't, and you don't stop. We don't want to stop rebelling. One theologian said that he saw his depravity, not when he was being immoral, but when he tried to be moral and realized he couldn't (C.S. Lewis). That's bondage. If it's just rebellion, we can quit. And I dare you to try it. Try to just quit all your sins and be good. If you can do it, great. The world will be a better place, you won't need Jesus for anything, and you won't need to waste your Sunday mornings coming here. But I bet you will find that you can't, and that's bondage. We are in bondage to sin. Therefore, we are also in bondage to the consequence of sin: death.

And this is why Jesus came. This is why it was necessary for him to take on human flesh, suffer, die, and rise again. Just as there are multiple ways in which the Bible talks about sin, there are even more ways that it talks about Jesus' salvation. Today we think of it as "the opening of the prison to those who are bound." Imagine yourself in a prison cell. The cell is death. The bars are sin. They keep you locked into death. Jesus comes. His death on the cross is him breaking the bars of sin so that he can get in to where you are. You wanted to get out, but you couldn't, so Jesus breaks in. He destroys sin on his way into death. He dies to get in. But now that the bars of sin are destroyed, there is nothing to hold either him or you in death. So he gets up. He rises from the dead. And he picks you up and carries you out. That's what he does by his resurrection. His death for sin breaks into our prison. And since the prison is destroyed by his inbreaking, he leads us out by his resurrection. This is a resurrection that we experience now in part, and only in part, because we still suffer from sin and death. But on the Last Day we will experience it in full. On that Day, when Jesus returns to raise the dead, sin will loosen its last dying grip, and we will be free for all eternity.

Jesus comes to release us from bondage to sin and death. He restores life. It's the year of the LORD's favor. It's the Year of Jubilee. And since the Jubilee also restores land, Jesus restores our inheritance in the Kingdom of Heaven. He doesn't break us out of prison to leave us with nothing. He breaks us out to bring us into the eternal Kingdom of his Father. That's the Year of Jubilee. That's what Jesus comes to do.

And that is why we rejoice. "Rejoice always," because this gift is yours always and for all eternity through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.