

Are We Ready?
Isa. 61: 1-4, 8-11

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; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 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. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

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. 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.

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God for God has clothed me with garments of salvation, God 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. 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.

At the very beginning of Advent a blog posting by Diana Butler Bass popped up, and in between diaper changes and feedings and adjustments back to work after time away with a new baby, caught my attention. Bass writes about Black Friday; a time when she says it is “tediously easy for people who write columns, ministers who preach sermons, or those who are generally comfortable with their jobs or finances to look down on the rushing mobs grabbing electronics from Wal-Mart shelves.” I’ll admit that I was intrigued at this point, because I am implicated here.

As a challenge to the same old familiar story, Bass points out a growing trend among the attendance at these sales, namely that these days the participants are most often, though not always, the poor, working poor or marginally middle class. On the other hand, she says, many of us who don’t brave the lines these days, again not all, don’t go because they can afford not to. Women are standing in long lines

to buy shoes, because they need a good pair of shoes. Men are standing in line to buy a pair of jeans because they can't afford them at full price. Parents are standing in line for an Xbox or a Playstation because even though they struggle financially, they also want to offer some normalcy and joy to their children this season and this is the only way they can pull it off. Bass is working to reframe the debate between Black Friday as good for the economy and Black Friday as an exercise in greedy consumerism into a morality tale. In particular, a tale about increasing disparity in a country that is deeply divided on issues of poverty and wealth.

This is a familiar tale to the writer of third Isaiah. A disparity to which he responds with the words we've heard this morning. The book of Isaiah is captured in three movements, three time periods in the life of the people of Judah. In First Isaiah, the words are of judgment and exile for a people who have turned away from God and neighbor. Second Isaiah is written as a comfort for those who find themselves now in captivity in Babylon and wondering where God is in this foreign land. Where we are today, in third Isaiah, the long years of the exile and occupation are over, and people are back home. But home is a very different place and those who have returned are a generation or more removed from those who left.

The former things were gone, they couldn't bring them back in the same way, and they weren't quite sure what God had in store for them. Some said it was right to re-build exactly as it was before, making the imperative the rebuilding of the Temple. Some said it was right to follow the letter of the law, casting out foreigners who had for years called this land home. Yet by picking and choosing which parts of the law to emphasize, families were being divided. Focusing on the rebuilding of the Temple to its former glory meant the exclusion of rebuilding homes for those who needed them. In their efforts to re-establish themselves, the old familiar disparities were resurfacing with a vengeance.

Into this speaks the prophet Isaiah, with a word that itself is in no way new. They are quickly missing the point again, so Isaiah returns to a familiar message to offer a different way forward. The joke about preachers is that in the end, we all have about two to three sermons, we just preach them a little differently each time based on the text for the day. I can imagine you've picked up on this, and might agree that it's less of a joke than it is a reality. The same can be said about prophets.

Isaiah's wants to be clear that it is not ok to focus exclusively on the rebuilding of the Temple, or to worry about who is in and who is out according to a short reading of the law; but instead the most important thing is to care for the needy among you. You are no longer captive, but your actions are making captives of

others. You are no longer mourning, but your actions are causing the mourning of others. You are no longer oppressed but your actions are leading to the oppression of others.

Jesus picks up these very same early words of the prophet in his first sermon in the gospel of Luke. Bringing them into the context of the Roman Empire, Jesus holds up Isaiah's imperative as his own. He, like Isaiah, has been anointed to show a different way of living that challenges the familiar disparities and offers new hope; binding up instead of tearing down, release in place of captivity, comfort instead of despair. It is for these very words that he is run out of Nazareth, his home town, and does not return. It is for these very words and the actions that accompany them that he is marked as a trouble maker, arrested, and crucified.

Why then, are these the words that follow us into Advent? This is a time of expectant hope, of unexpected peace, of overwhelming joy. We are busy listening to John the Baptist prepare the way, and imagining the coming kingdom that God has prepared for us. We are preoccupied with shepherds following the light and angels heralding the birth. Why delve into the discomfort of the exiles return home in a time like this? We are not ready for *that* kind of Advent message.

Yet, we don't have our heads buried in the sand. The disparities of wealth that Bass addresses in her article are not news to us. These days, economic upheaval is more on our minds than it might have been ten years ago. Poverty is more tangible and less able to be oversimplified. Just step into the Food Pantry at Noel Methodist and see how the line of guests has grown and the stocked shelves have dwindled. We can no longer justify quibbling over what it means to be really poor; nor can we justify being critical those who are because they own a refrigerator or a microwave or even an Xbox. To do that is to miss the point, to have a short reading of the law. More of us are feeling more vulnerable these days and fewer of us are unaffected. Even those who are poor find ways to feel normal in order to hold out hope.

We've spent the last few years hearing about these same concerns of poverty and wealth in different ways from those we elected to those who feel taxed enough already to those who in recent months occupied the public spaces of cities across the country. We've spent years being brokenhearted by the need that we see that we just can't quite find a way to address. And unfortunately, whether or not we think this is Advent appropriate, as the church, our time for waiting to be ready to talk about it is up.

And honestly, there is no better time than Advent to do this. Preparing ourselves for the birth of Jesus means getting ready for the world to change- again and again and again until it looks nothing like it does today. It's one more step in the direction of renewal of all creation, and God is giving us the tools we need to participate. With God's promise of righteousness and acts of salvation, we are clothed with all we need to live words of justice, of comfort, of provision;
of the end to homelessness and barely domesticated abuse and greed;
of the end to the story of the haves and the have-nots.

This is what we have been anointed for, like Isaiah. This is what the prophet is trying to tell the newly reformed Judah, and the way we can read these familiar words anew.

What would it look like for the church to dive into the conversations of economic disparity? It will not look like anything we have already heard, at least like nothing we hear coming from the loudest voices in the room. If we are to act in accordance with what we hear from Isaiah, we are not advocating for one in order to benefit another. True justice does not mean the freedom of one in trade for the oppression of another. True justice does mean changing our priorities from the greatest to the least. We are advocating, but for a total upending of expectations.

If we are to be honest, for many of us here, for many of us in the mainline church, it will be challenging for us to engage, because intentionally or unintentionally our comfort has a direct impact on the discomfort of others. I think that is the place we can begin, with confession. Acknowledging that it is easier to cast blame elsewhere or to soft-peddle the real need, because that means fewer implications on us. We can confess and then we can begin to live into those garments God places upon us- of righteousness and salvation.

Once we do, we can hear with new ears the familiar challenge of the prophet, and along with it, God's promise of righteousness and abundant growth. Our acts of justice, of mercy, of love, point to God and God's final salvation that promises an end to disparity and to mourning.

When it comes down to it, the Good News that we proclaim is that there will be a day when no one has to stand in a long line in order to get the best deal; when no one lives at the expense of another; when no few voices drown out a crowd; when no one is left out in the cold; when no one is mourning, or brokenhearted, or captive. Whether or not we participate, the time is coming. This is our Advent hope. This is what the season of Advent is preparing us for: the birth of the one

who comes breaking all of our expectations. He comes bringing light to cast into all the dark spaces of our lives and of our world. He comes, whether we are ready or not. And he comes, having clothed us in salvation, having watered us as the oaks of righteousness- that we may be a sign to all creation.