

Lesson: Isaiah 61:1-3,10,11

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for 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 and provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor...¹⁰ I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. — NIV

Prayer of the Day:

Hear our prayers, Lord Jesus Christ, and come with the good news of deliverance. Drive the darkness from our hearts and fill us with your light; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit one God now and forever. Amen.

Verse of the Day:

Alleluia. I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you. Alleluia. (Matt. 11:10b)

Sermon Text:

Have you ever read something what feels like a million times previously but all of a sudden, because of the current circumstances in life, something jumps out and grabs your attention in a way it never has before? In our Old Testament lesson today, such a phrase exists for me. **THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR.** In my pampered little life, I guess I've never felt like I was out of favor, at least for more than a few moments before I came back to my senses and recounted the manifold blessings God has showered upon me. However this time, this year as I read that phrase, my first thought was that would be nice. I don't think 2020 has exactly felt like the year that God shone His favor upon us. If you were to stop me out of the blue on the street and tell me that this had been a year of God's favor, I might well think a marble or two had escaped the bag. If you told me a year of favor was coming, even then it's surely a long way off. I mean, problems like the ones we are facing these days, they don't just disappear.

Israel in our lesson is not in a good place. We have talked the book of Isaiah enough in recent weeks that you know the prophet came with a message of doom and destruction, death and deportation for the people of God because of their sin. In fact, the book opens with these words, *Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.* (Isaiah 1:2-4)

The results would be total devastation as Babylon wiped Jerusalem from the map. It would be mourning in the ashes of the rubble, marching off as prisoners into captivity, a loss of everything they had held dear, grief and despair would break their hearts.

However, today God allows Isaiah's message to change. We find ourselves face to face with one of the bright gems of the Gospel imbedded throughout this lengthy book. *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for 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 and*

provide for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

Certainly, these words evoke the great celebrations of God's People during the year of Jubilee. The Year of God's Favor when the entire nation of Israel was to rejoice over the goodness of God and all the land reverted to its original owners. You can read more about it in Leviticus 25. It's actually a beautiful picture for the return of Israel to the promised land. However, without getting too deep into Old Testament times and practices, all of these Old Testament events serve as a picture of how God would save His people. In fact, Jesus Himself will one day pick up the scroll of Isaiah, pinpoint the words of our lesson and announce, "*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.* (Luke 4:21)"

Ah, and now these words apply to us. Not simply to the captivity of Israel in Babylon but to you and I trapped in world that is reeling from the consequences of sin which swirl around it, grieving the loss of loved ones because death is still doling out wages rightfully earned. Brokenhearted because the mirror of God's law has once again turned upon our favorite sins and exposed our captivity to the darkness around us. In the ashes of despair because a broken world has left us feeling helpless against it. Into this world, our Messiah has come! For this world, He will live! And for our sin, He will die! In His resurrection, we will find light which can pierce the darkness of death, bind up the self-inflicted wounds of sin and proclaim lasting freedom beyond anything our fallen world could ever offer.

The year of God's favor is not something as fleeting and forgettable as 365 days when God shows His blessings but a reality that belongs to us because of the love of God displayed in person of Jesus and that reality belongs to each one of us. Isaiah wrote, *I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.* Through the lens of Christ and His work for us, we have a joy which can pierce even the problems of pandemic and the darkness of death. We have a lasting hope which the might of Babylon and the panic of pandemic can never pry away.

With this in hand dear friends, notice what Isaiah does at God's urging. The verbs say it all preach, proclaim, proclaim, provide, bestow. This good news should not and cannot be bottled up. It must be shouted from rooftops and proclaimed on every street corner. Our world needs this message today, every bit as much as Israel needed it as they braced for the coming of Babylon. And as God's people, you and I will have been given the privilege of proclaiming it in word and action in our day.

Notice that God's people are called *oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.* And before we get too far ahead of ourselves, note also how that happens, *For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.* Yes, dear friends, as we peer at all things through the lens of the cross of our Savior Jesus, He will strengthen our faith. In Word and in Sacraments, He strengthens our faith so that we are not reeds blown here and there by the winds of worry and woe which swirl around us. Instead, confident that something far better than this world awaits we can rejoice in the many opportunities our God gives in the grief of our world, to witness to the joy which burns brightly in our hearts because of the reality our Savior has won and provided for us. We can live, not mired down in the darkness of hate and division, so common in the world around us, but hold to and holding out the love which God has showered upon us and every human being that walks the face of the earth. Not pouting in the pain of sin and its consequences but proclaiming the praise of God and all He has done for us and for others.

THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR. I have to admit before reading these words, It's not how I would describe 2020. But then it's not just this year, it's every year as we live in the reality of Christ and His cross. It's the eternity which awaits us all where pain and grief are gone forever. It's the real joy which we celebrate at Christmastime, pandemic or not. So, brothers and sisters, loved by God and bought in the blood of Christ, Live in **THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR! IT REALLY DOES BELONG TO YOU! SO, PROCLAIM IT IN ALL YOU DO!** Amen!