

“To Set the Captive Free”
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
III Advent – 11 December 2011
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

At a distance, from the heights of Jerusalem, the armies of Babylon would have looked like a colony of ants, swarming over the hills to the east. It must have been terrifying. A powerful empire was arriving in force, and their purpose was clear: the complete conquest of Judah.

Once it was over, the columns of captives, like threads being unraveled from a tapestry, stretched as far as the eye could see. They could have looked backward and seen smudges of smoke on the sky, what was left of their once mighty nation. The people of Jerusalem and the surrounding territories were utterly crushed.

To say it came as a shock would be a vast understatement. The defeated believed that God would deliver them, as had happened so many times before. From the wreckage, the words of a prophet would be remembered and written down. His name was Isaiah.

He had warned the people about God’s anger, but they wouldn’t listen. Too busy getting on with daily life, no one wanted to hear, much less accept, what Isaiah had been sent to say about justice and mercy and being humble before God. But now his ridiculed prophecy had been fulfilled, and no one laughed at his predictions anymore.

The children of God had become slaves of a foreign master. Some would work in the fields. Some probably slopped pigs, the ultimate disgrace and humiliation. A fortunate few might be employed as house servants or as government functionaries. But none of them would be free for the rest of their lives, and even worse, they likely saw no better future for their children.

However, Isaiah made other prophecies, about release and restoration, and these too were remembered and written down. They were a slender tendril of hope: words of “good news to the oppressed”; “to comfort all who mourn”; “liberty to the captives”; “release to the prisoners.” These visions of building up ancient ruins and repairing the ruined cities must have seemed like a dream. But people held on desperately to this part of Isaiah’s prophecy. If he was right about the horrible things, perhaps he might be right about the wonderful ones.

As history has proven, Isaiah was right. After a few generations, a new power arose that sent the slaves home. They rebuilt their lives, their land, their sacred Temple. However, they would not be free from foreign dominance or occupation for more than two millennia.

To us, the heart-stirring prophecy of Isaiah may seem irrelevant. Our nation has never known conquest. But the words of Isaiah echo on through history, and there are still many who need the hope of his inspired utterance.

Consider the prisoner. More than two million Americans, approximately one out of a hundred adults, are incarcerated at this very moment. Some of them deserve it, because they are dangerous, a threat to society. But many serve long sentences for relatively minor crimes, like illegal drug use. Even after release, those convicted are often on probation or parole, their movements restricted, jobs hard to get, a permanent stigma attached. In many states, including Virginia, felony offenders have their voting rights removed for life. Has society decided that these souls can never pay their debt? Do we have no confidence in the possibility of repentance and amendment of life?

Where is God’s promise of release and restoration in this? Has our society given up hope on God’s promise? The word of God alone cannot melt the bars and razor wire of our prisons, but God can inspire faithful Christians to work toward justice with mercy, a compassionate

approach that treats people with dignity and offers them opportunity. Disciples of Jesus Christ cannot ignore or minimize the words of Isaiah, for Jesus read those same verses in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth, declaring that he fulfills the prophecy by his presence. Whether lawmakers, or the citizens who elect them, we need to look at ways of releasing the prisoner.

Of course, not all prisoners have committed crimes and been convicted in a court of law. Each of us can feel imprisoned by circumstances beyond our control, by attitudes and prejudice immune both to reason and divine inspiration alike. Think of people trapped in poisonous jobs with low wages, no upward mobility, and no benefits. Think of those who have no job, often through no fault of their own, victims of a system that puts profits over people. These people feel trapped, locked up, and from a purely economic standpoint, they don't just feel that way. They are imprisoned. How does God release the prisoner?

From a spiritual standpoint, we could argue that a person, even in the most dire straits, can experience freedom. The Apostle Paul urged this perspective on slaves in several of his letters, and there's something to that. We need not be confined. Our faith can help us transcend our situation. But that precious gift of grace cannot be used as an excuse to neglect our call: to bring to fruition the Kingdom of God, a reign where Isaiah's words will become reality, and those who are imprisoned will find release.

"Good news to the oppressed" is more easily managed, because it involves a witness of hope. Yet that witness, too, cannot be limited to words alone. Action speaks louder than words. In fact, without action, words sound hollow. Who are the oppressed among us? Perhaps we could look toward those who are different in their appearance or beliefs.

People who are shut out and excluded often suffer a deep, wounding sense of oppression. They feel pressed. That's the root word of oppression. Who do we know who are pressed out

toward the fringes? Perhaps we can think of no one in particular, because we have learned to exclude them even from our thoughts. Simply noticing people with greater care is the starting point. Without that, we cannot deliver good news to the oppressed.

We could delve into each and every sort and condition Isaiah mentions, but what unites them all is a desperate desire to break free. And what unites us is that God has promised to deliver the captive. God has promised to comfort those who mourn. And without God, none of this will be possible. But without us, the deliverance of God's promises will be delayed.

That might sound blasphemous, but remember that the Babylonians were sent by God to conquer His own chosen people as a way of bringing them out of their moral stupor. And when those people were sent home from exile, God accomplished this astonishing act by causing another, more merciful power to arise and set them free. Throughout all of human history, as scripture attests, God has worked through people: sometimes through kings and armies, sometimes through ordinary people like you and me, often without their conscious knowledge. But with very few exceptions, God has worked out His purpose through people.

We can be that people: the bearers of God's promise, the emissaries of God's purpose. We already do so in a variety of ways: witnessing to the light of Christ's presence by our very existence as a worshipping community; striving to provide opportunity for the oppressed, offering comfort to those deprived of their freedom and to those who suffer loss. What we do to bring the light of Christ into greater focus pleases God greatly. Yet our potential has just begun to be tapped, because with the grace of Jesus moving through us, amazing things are possible.

I know it seems far-fetched, but we can alter society in ways that fulfill the prophecy, if we seek and receive the power of the Holy Spirit. It may be hard. It may take time, our entire

lives even, but with the light of Christ shining through us, the captive can find release, the grieving can find hope and comfort, the oppressed can receive good news.

Listen for the Spirit and obey the command. Remember the prophet's words, and how they were once fulfilled in the most unlikely of ways, and how the prophecy – fulfilled by the presence of Jesus – seeks fulfillment through us, the Body of Christ on Earth. What a glorious calling! What a cause to rejoice! May we be blessed to spread the good news of the Kingdom of God so that true liberty may become a reality for all who desire it. Amen.