

Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 27, 2019
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Isaiah 61:1-6 The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim 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 joy
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.
4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.
5 Strangers will shepherd your flocks;
foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.
6 And you will be called priests of the Lord,
you will be named ministers of our God.
You will feed on the wealth of nations,
and in their riches you will boast.

“Power in Proclamation”

Fairy tales capture our imagination. Good stories. Interesting characters. Sometimes powerful lessons. But there's also the dimension of exploring the what-ifs of magical powers. What if you had the power to make a wooden puppet become a real boy? What if you could wave a magic wand and turn a pumpkin into a royal coach to match the magical ball gown for Cinderella? What if you had the power to talk with animals and get them to help you defeat the villains?

It's not hard to imagine what you could do with powers like those. Wave a magic wand and the house gets tidied up in an instant. Say the magic word and children respond

immediately. Wave your magic wand and all the long meetings and multiple email threads and excessive training would be gone. Just make the proclamation and things turn out just as you planned. Sports fans could pause live action so the officials could always get the calls right. Social media posts would have the power to transform reality rather than just incite outrage.

Isaiah chapter 61 shows us God's power at work. God doesn't need a magic wand. He doesn't have any spells. We learn that God has power to work out his plan for his people. Here's how it starts: **"The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."** (Isaiah 61:1) God's message works. His proclamation has power. His words have power to bring healing. There is power in proclamation.

1) The Message of Christianity Appears Weak from the Outside

To be honest, though, people with a connection to God don't always feel very powerful. From the outside, Christianity often appears weak and foolish. Maybe people look at us with the same pity people usually reserve for anyone who still believes in fair tales. But worse than fairy tales that just entertain or sometimes scare little children or even provide inspiration, it seems, at least from the outside, like Christianity enslaves and entraps. They see Christians as people who voluntarily give up their right to make decisions about their own lives. Jesus is alright to most people. After all, he just wants to accept you for who you are and support your life choices. But religion is terrible. And Christianity has so many rules and requirements. Christianity crushes people under a weight of guilt and shame, instead of inspiring them to be their true selves.

And sometimes Christians share this feeling about our own religion. Maybe it's not such a surprise that within the church we find a high concentration of people who are afflicted and heartbroken and prisoners, people who mourn and filled with despair. In some of our darker moments we wonder if the world isn't right. We feel like we've expended so much energy trying to live according to God's commands, but we always find ourselves coming up short. We work hard at setting ourselves apart from the world that lives by its own standards, and yet we see disappointment in how our performance turns out. We even wonder if we've wasted our life. While the rest of the world goes on not even caring about their relationship with God, we are so aware of what God expects that we start to feel weak and overwhelmed by it all.

2) Jesus brings his healing word to our hearts

That's why it's good that there's a difference between religion and Christianity. Christianity isn't just about rules, it's about a relationship with Jesus. It's not so much about what we've done for God, but what God is doing for us in Jesus Christ. That's why it's so important to establish Jesus as the speaker in Isaiah 61. Bible critics ignore the basic interpretation aid that we can look to the chapters around this one for clues as to the speaker in this chapter. Isaiah records Servant Songs in which it is obvious Isaiah isn't speaking for himself. Those prophecies give us the voice of a different kind of Servant who will do more dramatic things

for God and for God's people (Isaiah 49:1-7; Isaiah 50:4-11). But of course we have the advantage of looking ahead to Luke chapter 4. There, Jesus quotes these exact verses from Isaiah 61 and then clearly identifies who these verses are about: **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."** (Luke 4:21) His point is unmistakably clear. Jesus comes to those broken and wounded by sin. Jesus is anointed for this very purpose. God's people are broken and held captive and imprisoned by the sin we can't seem to shake inside us. We mourn over the frustrations it causes in our own lives. We despair over the damage it causes the people around us. Jesus comes to announce good news to those overwhelmed by sin in their lives.

3) Wounded Hearts withhold healing

Sometimes, though, it's hard for God's people to see real change just after getting good news. We can read through the message of Isaiah and close the book on God's Servant like we are putting aside a good bedtime story. Sometimes we get wrapped up in a cycle of our broken hearts. We fail to see the way out of our failures and feel trapped. We forget the dangerous effects sin can have in our lives when the good news from Jesus doesn't reach us at a heart level, it only stays on a surface level.

So sin takes root and grows in our hearts. Isaiah has a phrase that captures this vicious cycle when he compares us to ruined cities that **"have been devastated for generations."** (Isaiah 61:4) Sin causes relationships to be broken. Sin causes hurt and opens up wounds. And yet so often our sin causes us to focus on the faults of others. Our sin causes us to distort and minimize our own flaws. Our sin magnifies the hurt someone has caused to me. Sin builds up to toxic levels inside our own hearts. Sin withholds forgiveness from fellow sinners.

If you've never watched the movie "Unbroken," I would highly recommend it. The movie tells the true life story of Louis Zamperini. As a child he was always getting in trouble. That is, until he discovered his gift for running. He earned a college scholarship and competed in the Olympics. Then World War II broke out. Louis was drafted into the Army Air Forces and served on a bomber. On one mission, though, his plane crashed in the middle of the Pacific Ocean far from land. He and a few other airmen found a rubber life raft and managed to survive the open ocean, hunger, a lack of water, and shark attacks. When they made landfall they walked straight into the arms of Japanese forces who imprisoned them, beat them, and tortured them. The story highlights the especially violent physical and psychological abuse inflicted on Louis by one of the Japanese prison guards. But the war came to an end. Louis was freed and given a hero's welcome back home.

That's where the movie ends. And if that were the end of the story, it would be a triumph of Louis' spirit, his toughness, his determination to never give up. But the book continues. Louis enjoyed his new life and his celebrated status. He married a debutante. He was toasted at parties. But inside he was unraveling. He was consumed by hatred over what had happened to him. He had fantasies of revenge against his chief tormenter. He developed a problem with alcohol. He was falling apart.

Finally, his wife, half out of desperation, invited him to come hear a young traveling preacher named Billy Graham. That's where he heard a message that saved his life. He learned that he was forgiven by Jesus Christ. Through that forgiveness he was able to let go of the hurts and wrongs, the terrible atrocities inflicted on him. He even sought out his captors after the war to extend forgiveness to them.

There are few things more toxic in our lives than unforgiveness. When we are unwilling to forgive, resentment and anger build up, poisoning our own hearts. Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping the other person gets hurt.

4) Jesus breaks the vicious cycle of devastations

Jesus wants you to see that he is the only way out of the vicious cycle caused by sin. Jesus denies you of your right to inflict pain on someone who has hurt you. Jesus erases all your efforts at score keeping. Jesus has a better solution than the one humans devise where victims are allowed to retaliate, where grievances are aired and then issue counterstrikes, where anger grows greater and greater until an explosion takes place.

Jesus has good news to announce. But it's not just words Jesus gives. Jesus was anointed with Spirit to carry out God's will. The good news Jesus delivers is what he actually was sent to accomplish: **"He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes."** (Isaiah 61:1-3) The brokenhearted find healing in the wounds inflicted on Jesus. Those held captive by hurts and shackled by the sins committed against them have been released when Jesus takes all those hurts on himself. Those who are sorrowing and grieving have the victory of Jesus over every soul's worst enemy.

5) Jesus' Words Have Performative Power

All of us have fantasies of being the CEO or boss of the company. How amazing would it be to just issue an edict and force everyone to comply! How awesome would it be to have presidential power to issue a command or sign an order and people must follow it!

The words of Jesus have power. But he doesn't use them to serve any delusional dictatorial impulses. Jesus uses his powerful words to actually transform. Jesus changes you. He gives you a: **"crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."** (Isaiah 61:3) Instead of funeral clothes, you have wedding garments. Instead of dread over what you've done or anger over what someone has done to you, Jesus gives you the joy of his flawless life.

The good news of Jesus empowers people through the forgiveness they have. Isaiah pictures it as people who now become a force for reconstruction: **"They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations."** (Isaiah 61:4) Forgiven sinners work to

build up the church and repair it after the ravages of sin. God's people have the privilege of serving him: **"And you will be called priests of the Lord, you will be named ministers of our God."** (Isaiah 61:6) Knowing Christ as your intercessor who goes to God on your behalf allows you to be an intercessor for a fellow sinner. You have access to God. You have the dignity of serving your Savior. As a sinner who has received God's forgiveness, you have become an instrument for God to distribute his forgiveness to others.

Fairy tale writers from centuries ago might be impressed at the little boxes we have in our homes or hold in our hands. You can give a command to Siri or Alexa or Google and that miniature computer does what you say. They can be great sources of information and provide helpful assistance. But there are also serious limitations to their power. Jesus showed his true power when he came as God's Servant. The life of Jesus made those words of Isaiah a powerful reality. His powerful life gives his promises power. Jesus works his forgiveness powerfully in human hearts through the proclamation of his Word. His Word has power to transform people. His proclamation has healing power. There is power in proclamation. Amen.