

December 13, 2020 – Advent 3 – Our Reception of the Promised Savior  
Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11

<sup>1</sup>*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,*

<sup>2</sup>*to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn, <sup>3</sup>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.*

<sup>10</sup>*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.*

<sup>11</sup>*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.*

I am going to say something that might irritate you if you have been feeling down. This year, 2020, has been the year of the Lord's favor; we have experienced good news, the gospel. At times, you may think a statement like that is unrealistic. Then remember King Hezekiah standing on the wall of Jerusalem, perhaps with the prophet Isaiah at his side, while Sennacherib boasts about his mighty Assyrian army encamped around the city and ridicules the Lord God of Israel. Then picture the corpses of that army strewn before the walls, slaughtered in one night by the angel of the Lord.

Knowing this, believing God's promise, and trusting his love, we declare this about 2020: **This has been "the year of the Lord's favor"** We have experienced God's good pleasure and goodwill. We affirm this because ...

1. He released us from prison (1-3)

This year the Lord God has in fact been binding "*up the brokenhearted, [proclaiming] freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.*" The eternal Son of God, the Promised Savior, says this. He speaks through the prophet Isaiah and says, "*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me.*" The promised Savior has appeared repeatedly in the prophecies of Isaiah.

- In chapter 11 God promised that, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse... The Spirit of the LORD will rest on [that shoot];" that's the Christ.
- In chapter 42 the Lord God said of Christ, "Here is my servant... I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations."
- In chapter 49 God promised that the Christ will "say to the captives, 'Come out,' and to those in darkness, 'Be free!'"

Now go seven centuries forward in time and a hundred miles north to the synagogue in Nazareth. Jesus is there. The congregation has asked him to speak. Taking the scroll of Isaiah, Jesus reads words we heard this morning from Isaiah: "*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, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.*" Jesus hands back the scroll and says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:20). God the heavenly Father sent the Holy Spirit to anoint his eternal Son to be the servant that would proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Before he is born of the virgin Mary and receives the name Jesus, that promised servant is speaking through the prophet Isaiah.

The townspeople of Nazareth understand this exactly. They know he is claiming to be the promised Savior, the second person of the Triune God. The townsfolk have known Jesus for nearly three decades. Joseph the carpenter raised him.

They throw Jesus out of the synagogue and try to throw him off a cliff. They are shocked; the message seems impossible. The gospel, you know, is like that.

Eventually, perhaps after the resurrection, some of the people in that synagogue may have become his disciples. James, Jesus' half-brother, may have been in that synagogue that Sabbath day; he once stood against Jesus, then he became a pillar of the church.

During his ministry, Jesus did preach good news to the poor—to the humble people like the woman caught in adultery who needed forgiveness and life. He bound up the wounds of the brokenhearted, like Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb who thinks Jesus is the gardener and then hears him speak her name, “Mary!”, and her wounds are gone! He proclaimed freedom to Zacchaeus who would never have expected Jesus to enter his house, but he did. He ate with sinners and released them from the darkness of sin. Jesus’ ministry of three years were years of the Lord’s favor.

This is the message we need this hard year. Look around. The oil wells are not pumping much. Jobs moved away and a virus came. People feel trapped: stuck in jobs they do not enjoy, closed in houses struggling with loved ones who sometimes seem unlovable. Addiction hooks some, alcohol consumes others.

Jesus proclaims freedom, a year of jubilee. The Jews who heard Isaiah in Jerusalem knew the picture exactly. Every fifty years God ordained that servants were to be released from obligation and that plots of land to be restored to the original family. Jesus proclaims a reset for us: forgiveness, hope, guidance, and strength of break down the barriers that lock us down.

If, on the other hand, we give in to self-pity and anger toward God, we would earn a “*day of vengeance*” as Christ says through Isaiah. If we turn away from God and trust in our own efforts to make life more tolerable, we will bring God’s holy and righteous anger down upon ourselves.

God does not want this to happen. Punishment is “the foreign work of God,” something he does not want, but he cannot allow unrepentant sin to go unpunished. God does want something far different for us; he wants us to enjoy a year of the Lord’s favor. He wants to turn to him as the lost son returned to his father. He wants us to enjoy a year of his favor, indeed a lifetime of his good pleasure.

During 2020 God has placed on us “*a crown of beauty instead of ashes,*” or to say it another way, “*the oil of gladness instead of mourning.*” He has draped around us “*a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*” We express our confidence in God’s goodwill when we sing, “What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!”

Our Savior calls us “*oaks of righteousness*”. The Apostle Paul writes about this oak. He says that you who trust in Jesus are “rooted and grounded in [God’s] love” (Ephesians 3:17). Sometimes you sing: “standing, standing, standing on the promises of God my Savior; standing, standing, I’m standing on the promises of God.” Jesus Christ tells us that we belong to the Lord. We are mighty oaks, “a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” ...

## 2. Therefore, we rejoice in the Lord (10-11)

Through the voice of the prophet Isaiah, we respond to the one who proclaims, “*the year of the Lord’s favor.*” We say, “*I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God.*”

How can we respond with this kind of joy and optimism even during a hard year? We can because, “[the servant of the Lord, the Promised Savior] *has clothed [us] with garments of salvation and arrayed [us] in a robe of righteousness.*”

Jesus was planted like a mighty oak in that synagogue when he said, “This scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” He spoke the truth with unflinching courage. He faced down self-righteous pharisees and called out the hypocrisy of the priests. He offered people the bread of life when they wanted nothing more than bread on their table. He offered living water to a Samaritan woman when he exposed her sins. He ate with disreputable tax collectors and obvious sinners who had repented, while religious leaders censured him. He stood before Pilate and spoke of truth, when that cynic cared more about Caesar and power than forgiveness. You and I shrink at times from speaking truth to those in power and authority. We hide our faith at times rather than speaking boldly. Jesus clothed us in the robe of his righteousness. His obedience covers our sins. More than that, Jesus’ garment of righteousness was bloodied by his suffering and death on the cross. He suffered our punishment.

This is the great exchange. We are forgiven of the guilt and punishment we deserved; we are delivered from the power of sin to condemn us and control us; we are released from the prison of eternal death. Jesus took our sins onto himself and suffered their consequence, his righteous obedience is credited to us. We “have washed [our] robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14).

Therefore, we rejoice in the Lord. Jesus has changed our relationship with God.

- We belong to him. Like a bridegroom or a bride, we are married to Christ. He “prepared [us] as a bride adorned for her husband” (Revelation 21:2).
- We are cherished, loved, and honored, “*as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*”
- We are priests who have direct access to God as he comes to us directly in Word and Sacrament and we go to him in prayer; we do not need saints or the Virgin Mary to intercede for us. We represent God to the world, as Peter wrote, “You are ... a royal priesthood... that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9,10).

- We are alive. God has made us a garden filled with sprouts and growing plants, *“the planting of the Lord.”*

Rather than feeling dejected, disappointed, angry, and dissatisfied, think of the life God has given you: cheer people up with the unexpected, wonderful promises of God. Tell others about “the hope that lies within you.” Rejoice before the world; *“the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.”*

You have a message of hope for the Navajo Nation and other nations in North America. Pastor Jim Fleming the other day reflected on his 18 years of ministry around Farmington. He observed: “people need the gospel;” they need to know about the favorable year of the Lord.

This year the Lord has led our church and many other congregations to use social media and the Internet more than ever before to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

This year the Lord has given us opportunities to help others in need. This becomes a bridge to release people from the prison of despair and condemnation of sin and death. During this hard year we have seen God’s blessings. This has been the favorable year of the Lord. Amen.