

Third Sunday of Advent – Year B – December 11, 2011
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
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Far from the realms of Isaiah's plea to "Comfort, O comfort, my people" today's reading from the prophet challenges us to a more profound understanding of our mission, and the meaning of salvation. To give us a sense of Isaiah's theme, here's a provocative quote from priest and author, Albert David Belden, "You are not saved by Christ if your blood does not boil at the gross injustice and injury to [humankind] of the slums, or of unemployment, or of war, or of [inequity in the distribution] of the means of life."

It's pretty common to use words in church that we don't hear too often anywhere else. Salvation is definitely one of those words. Once spoken the word is out there. It may even brush against us, entering only our minds as comforting thought without actually making a dent in our lives or changing the way we think or act. For Christians, snug in the assurance of our salvation by God's grace and our faith in Jesus Christ, we may not even be aware of the concrete means of transformation, or the incarnational, flesh and blood reality of our salvation. In this season of Advent, we're eagerly anticipating the birth of the Word made flesh, even as we await His second coming again in glory. Jesus' mission in and to the world is achieved through His flesh and blood life, death, and resurrection. Just as the incarnation is all about God coming into the world as a human being, God fully intends for us to live out our salvation in and through our bodies, our minds, hearts, hands and mouths. Our salvation is not just the future hope of everlasting life, a means to avoid hell and get into heaven, or an escape from death. Our salvation is new life, right relationships, and the revelation of God's truth. As Paul says in his second letter to the Corinthians (6:2), "See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!" Our salvation is a present reality, expressed in concrete ways, through our transformed lives here and now, today, in this place, outside these doors, at home, at work, in this community of faith, and in the broader community. Our mission looks like faith in action.

Jesus' own self-confessed mission as shared with us in the Gospel of Luke comes from the opening lines of this passage of Isaiah. He reads from the scroll to describe His own mission and ministry to the world, and God's high regard for the most vulnerable in society, the oppressed, and the outcasts. Jesus tells His fellow Jews gathered in the synagogue that He is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic words. The good news that Jesus brings to the lowly and marginalized people of the world is healing and freedom, release, comfort for those who mourn, and a new way of living that embodies the reality of a jubilee-oriented community. The year of jubilee, every fifty years, is the time prescribed by Torah when all debts are wiped clean, slaves are set free, and all land is returned to its original owner. There are plenty of us here today who would welcome a clean slate financially, or who would rejoice for freedom from credit card debt. Some of us pray for God's release from compulsions or addictions, or from violence. More than a few of us praise the Lord for release from the prison of cultural pressures that dictate conformity to worldly expectations. Sadly, many of us end up starting the New Year with a burden of debt, and even a sense of hopelessness or self-loathing.

The Spirit of the Lord brings good news today. Cultivate the fruit of Spirit that is gentleness. Let's consider how God is calling us to live transformed lives that Isaiah says others will notice. There are concrete ways to transform our gift giving. We can give a gift of service to others this year. We can bake cookies for our troops in the name of a friend or family member. We can give the gift of time, by visiting with someone who's sick or in hospital. We can give a gift of love to the hungry, by sharing a food item for the Love Kitchen. How about sharing the story of how Jesus has changed your life. Share it with a loved one or a complete stranger, or write it down so we can share it in our newsletter, and bless the whole community. Be open to the power and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Ask the Lord to help us all use our spiritual gifts in creative ways to bring new life or healing to someone who is needs those gifts.

Isaiah also expresses salvation in other concrete ways. The first is as a restored city, rebuilt by the

Israelites. The second is as the glory of God's garden, bursting with abundance, and where the Israelites are great oak trees growing in relationship with God. God intends their branches to reach out with the same hospitality that characterizes the wideness of God's mercy. Our own branches are also meant to reach out and touch the lives of others. Our own outreach ministries are concrete ways that witness to the reality of God's presence in the world, and as a sign of God's gracious deliverance. By faith, you and I have already accepted God's invitation to become agents of His presence, and living witnesses of Christ's transforming mission in and to the world. All we have to do is offer ourselves to God. Even in the midst of the tragedies and challenges of life in a world that is not yet fully redeemed, God will use us to lighten the darkness. Our salvation looks like transforming faith in action today and every day, and Isaiah has a challenging mission for us.

To be missional, to put our faith in action as God's agents of change, we must care for those to whom God sends good news in Christ Jesus. The prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures and Jesus Himself tell us that God holds a special concern for the lowly and downtrodden, the outcasts and the most vulnerable. Far from being at the center of worldly power, the church is most noticeable as the hands and feet of Christ when we live out our faith at the margins, where the outcasts gather. However, mission isn't something we do to and for others, so much as who we are in our hearts, and how we live. Our mission is to be co-creators with God, participants in building and planting to the glory of God. We're invited to share with God in restoring justice and peace, respecting the dignity and equality of all people. Our divine mission blesses us with the opportunity to reach out with compassion to meet needs in the broader community. Living our salvation now, putting our faith into action witnesses to Christ's love, and invites others to experience the blessings of God's kingdom. We grow in righteousness, and live out God's salvific grace, when we extend God's hand to our neighbors to meet their needs, and purposefully build up God's kingdom. This is how we plant an abundant garden to the glory of God. Our garden grows when we offer comfort and healing, liberty and release. It flourishes as we develop and grow into a grace-filled community that reflects the year of God's favor that is jubilee living. Jubilee living is more than liberty and freedom. It is working to reconfigure, or reconstruct unjust socio-economic systems until there is equity for all.

We are living our faith in God's mission when others notice that we are different, that we live differently, and work together for restoration and reconciliation, as well as justice and peace. In a jubilee community, all are welcome, and all share their spiritual gifts and resources joyfully with praise and thanksgiving to God. As a jubilee community, we stand as a sign of God presence, and witnesses of our gracious salvation in Christ Jesus. With only one more week of Advent in which to prepare ourselves for rebirth, it's time to recall not just that Jesus came and is coming, but *why* He came, for the life of the world. Ultimately, "Salvation is not something that is done for [us] but something that happens within [us]. It is not the clearing of a court record, but the transformation of a life attitude" (Albert W. Palmer). As we go out in mission this week consider what life-changing growth and building, restoration and renewal is happening in our own lives, and in the Spirit-filled life of this community of faith. What transformative divine gifts are we anticipating that will be signs of God's gracious and healing presence? We glorify God in living out our salvation and His call to mission when we place God's justice, mercy and graciousness at the heart of all that we build and grow. As the prophet Jeremiah writes (29:11-12), "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope." God's promises are sure, and our future begins now.

Amen.