

Restoration Begins Today

Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2020

[Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)

Today is the third Sunday of Advent—a time when Christians celebrate the incarnation—when God became man through Christ, whose birth we celebrate. It is also a time when we look forward to the second coming of our Lord. Christmas is just around the corner, and the sights, sounds, and smells of the holiday are everywhere. Houses and buildings sparkle with brilliant lights. People are busy buying gifts and making plans to spend time with family and friends. Christmas carols populate the soundtrack of our day, and it seems like folks go out of their way to be nice to each other. It is like Christmas brings out the best in many of us.

At the same time, many people struggle during this time of year. For some, Christmas brings despair. Not everyone has the resources to purchase gifts, so this season brings their lack into sharp contrast. Some people have experienced loss, and Christmas reminds them of a deceased loved one. Others may not have the relationships they would like, and this season makes them feel lonely and isolated. Let us not forget the people in our community who may feel alienated because they do not celebrate Christmas. What does the coming of Christ mean for all our brothers and sisters who struggle during the Christmas season? Is the coming of Christ good news for them?

In the midst of my excitement and joy in celebrating Christ, I must admit that my natural tendency is to ignore these questions. If I am honest, part of me does not want to think about sad things. I just want to focus on the pretty lights and the smell of pine. I just want to sing

Christmas songs and watch *It's a Wonderful Life* on TV. So, I avert my eyes from those in despair and cover my ears so I cannot hear their cries. Is this what it means to celebrate Advent—to focus on the good and ignore the bad? Of course not! I believe that Advent should cause us to seek those who are struggling. This season should compel us to reach out to those pushed to the margins. Let us look to the Word to see what the Lord says. Here is the text of the day:

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, 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, 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. 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 61:1-4](#))

“For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery and wrongdoing. In my faithfulness I will reward my people and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.” 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 his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 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. ([Isaiah 61:8-11](#))

In this beautiful passage, Isaiah the prophet reported the words of the Messiah given to a people returning from exile. The people did not know what the future held. Their way of life had been lost and they lost touch with their identity. They believed they had lost everything. They were a people overwhelmed by poverty, brokenness, and despair. In the midst of this, Isaiah wrote a message of hope to his audience. He let them know that the Messiah, the Anointed One of the Lord, would fix everything that was broken. God would not overlook or ignore their suffering, and one day he would dispel their despair. The Messiah's restoration would be personal and complete. God would not only restore his people collectively, but he would restore them individually, no matter their state. He would leave nothing undone.

Isaiah's message must have been a great comfort to his audience. It no doubt gave them hope, but I can imagine it also raised some questions. When I am suffering, it is comforting to know that at some point my pain will end, but it is better if I know *when* my suffering will end. I want to know how long I must endure. When I have a headache, I reach for the fast-acting pills. I do not want the drug that starts working in an hour. I want the medicine that will ease my pain as quickly as possible. Those who originally heard Isaiah's message likely felt the same way. They wanted their pain and alienation to end. The message about the Messiah was good news, but they wanted to know when their poverty, brokenness, and despair would cease.

More than half a millennium later, a young teacher went into the synagogue in Nazareth. He took the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, stood, and in a clear voice he recited the first two verses of the passage we just read. He expertly wove in another passage from Isaiah to deepen his message. Like a master orator, the young rabbi sat down and paused. The crowd was riveted, with every eye on the speaker. These were the descendants of Isaiah's audience and were used to empty sermons that did more for the speaker than for the people. They were

used to empty words and broken promises. They were used to men claiming to be the shining redeemer of Israel then tarnishing over time. They were used to restoration that never felt complete. These were the ones who still carried a bit of the poverty, brokenness, and despair of their ancestors. But this rabbi was different, and the crowd sat on the edge of their seats. In words that blended confidence and compassion, the rabbi said, “*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

This account of an event early in the ministry of Jesus was captured in [Luke 4:16-21](#). Luke lets us know that at long last there was an answer to the question, “How long?” That day in Nazareth, Jesus declared that he was the beginning of the end of poverty. He was the beginning of the end of brokenness. He was the beginning of the end of captivity and slavery. He was the beginning of a new era of grace. And this new beginning started *today!*

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection brought restoration not only for Israel, but for all humanity, and Jesus brings restoration to us today. This is good news for humanity, and it is good news for us individually. In one way or another, we are all poor, broken, and with reason to despair. We all suffer. We are all in need of restoration and redemption. At one point or another, we have all cried out, “Lord, how long?” Suffering is part of the human condition. Christians—those who have experienced the newness of life that can only be found in Jesus—should therefore be filled with compassion. Our hearts should turn towards those hurting in our midst. We should not avert our eyes, cover our ears, and stay silent. Since we have been restored in Christ, we should be the first to proclaim that Jesus has come to give us a new beginning, and there is not a hurt he cannot heal. There is no one lost that he cannot find, and nothing broken that he cannot fix.

That is not to say that once we start following Christ, our lives become easier. Jesus is not a magic wand that makes our problems go away.

Following Jesus does not change our circumstances; it changes *us*. Jesus causes us to see the world differently — we see the world through the lens of the life-giving cross. We see ourselves as loved and accepted by God, and we see others as loved and accepted by God. This enables us to love others because they are made in God’s image. We have a purpose in Christ and work in which to participate by the Holy Spirit. Because of Christ, we can find hope, peace, joy, and love in any circumstance.

And, for Christ’s sake, we do not want to keep this good news to ourselves. We should want to share it with others. How can we do this? Verse three of Isaiah 61 says this of the Messiah:

[Messiah will] 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. ([Isaiah 61:3](#))

Here, Isaiah provides us with directions leading to participating in Jesus’ work to restore and redeem.

“Provide for those who grieve in Zion...” Jesus tangibly provides for those who grieve. As a result, Christians should also give their time, talent, and treasure to those in need, and our giving should similarly be tangible and appropriate. Too often, we only pray for those who suffer when we should provide *while* we pray. Jesus met the immediate needs of people—like healing the sick and infirmed—while he cared for them spiritually. Another mistake Christians often make is to provide for those who are struggling with what they believe is needed instead of what the people actually need. We need to engage the people in our community and find out from them how we can be a blessing. This can be done directly with people in need through conversations or by forming relationships with charities and community-based

organizations who specialize in serving a particular people group. One way or another, our giving should be grounded in relationship.

“...to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes...” When we suffer, our pain often distorts how we see the world. We can become preoccupied with our situation and not fully present in our life. If we are not careful, we can begin to identify ourselves by our pain. For example, our momentary loneliness can easily turn into the narrative that we are unloved. This is why Jesus explicitly taught us that our identity is not rooted in pain, but in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a message that needs to be shared with those who are suffering. We need to tell them that they are not defined by their circumstances but by God’s love. Their identity is not the problem; they are made in the image of God. However, in order to be credible, we need to believe this truth before we share it with others. We need to guard against our own prejudices and biases. We have to see past people’s problems and predicaments and see their inherent value and worthiness of respect because they are God’s child.

“... the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” This passage in Isaiah teaches us that we should invite those who suffer to participate in opportunities of joy and praise. For Christians, Jesus is the ultimate source of joy and the origin of praise. Therefore, we should invite others to celebrate and experience Christ with us. Jesus did not only save us, he invited us into his life. He created space for us so we can be with him for all eternity. Similarly, we should invite those who suffer into our homes, celebration meetings, outreach activities, and other events that allow them to experience the joy that is in Jesus.

As we continue to celebrate Advent, let us remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for all, including the poor, the broken, and those mired in despair. No matter the situation, Jesus is a new

beginning. While the sights, sounds, and smells of this season are wonderful and should be enjoyed, our focus should be on Christ and the message of hope he brings to all humanity. We need to spread the Word that we do not have to wait for renewal. We do not have to wait for new life. Jesus has come to us, and the end of all suffering begins today.