

Sermon for December 13th, 2020

3rd Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Sermon texts: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 and John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Sermon Title: *The Garments of Salvation*

PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Lord, come to us at South Plains this morning and overshadow us with your presence and your love. Let us be open to your blessings, the good news that you are coming to us in the birth of the Christ Child. Guide us to walk with the poor and the needy. Make us thirsty for justice and righteousness, not titles, riches, and glory. Help us live according to your gospel and trust that all things are possible with you. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION

Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Light, and illumine us; come as Holy Wind, and cleanse us; come as Holy Truth and dispel our ignorance; come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Life and dwell in us. Amen.

This morning we unroll Isaiah's scroll for the third time. The exile is over, but the Israelites are still not a nation. They are struggling. It is to them that Isaiah describes a future that is blessed, promises a restoration for what they have lost, and a transformation that alters the world in which they live. The prophet also proclaims that God will give garlands to those who mourn instead of ashes; God's people will wear garments of salvation and robes of righteousness like the festive clothing or ornaments that a bride or groom might wear for their wedding day. I love the lush and evocative imagery of this text; who would not be happy and joyful on one's wedding day? However, people wearing garments of salvation and robes of righteousness can come in unlikely costumes.

My childhood home in Canada was frequented by a host of strange and interesting guests, who came, I suspect, because of my parent's hospitality. Once such character was the trapper, Jack Draper, who came out of the bush of Northern Ontario twice a year for supplies. He was a large, barrel-chested man with a blind, milky right eye which he swore he had lost in a fight with a muskrat. One spring he brought a black bear cub that had been abandoned into our house and turned it loose in our foyer. Bears have a wilderness smell to them, but it was difficult to tell whether Jack or the bear smelled more intense. My mother aired the house for a day or two after Jack and the bear departed, but never suggested that he should not return.

Another guest was a vivacious French-Canadian woman, Catholic, a journalist from a Toronto newspaper who had married into an English Protestant family, who were our neighbors. When Idola and her husband Bill came from the city to visit their northern relatives, Idola would sneak away to our house, I suspect, when she couldn't stand her in-laws' dull conversation any longer. In those days, there was a wide divide in Canada between Catholics and Protestants, and French and English-speaking Canadians. I imagine the visits across the way could be tense and formal.

Maybe Idola just needed a drink, because she and my father would wile away the afternoon, drinking scotch, talking politics, and swapping stories. Idola had a musical voice, and she would switch rapidly from English to French and back again. She wore her dark hair in a French twist, glamorous furs adorned her, and she smelled wonderful. She was far from the drab, penitent grey personalities of her Protestant relatives, whom I don't remember as being either particularly kind or hospitable.

Both Idola and Jack were kind. Jack would sometimes tell me that he would trap beaver and make me a fur coat, then wink at me with his milky, blind eye, and Idola never stopped fussing over me and trying to get me to speak French. Perhaps it was because of people like Jack and Idola that I learned to love those who brought joy to my life even though they stood outside the church's narrow definition of what it meant to wear a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit, who could be called to display God's glory.

Even though I could not have articulated my feelings as a child, and they eventually disappeared from my life, I think of them often as an adult because they brought light and hope and joy for to a child. Those who reflect God's light come in unlikely costumes: trapper's clothes and perhaps even in furs.

Isaiah's prophecy makes clear that restoration is not just something God does for the people; rather restoration comes from the behavior of those with whom God makes a covenant. *I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robes of righteousness.* We are reminded that salvation and righteousness are not other worldly qualities saved for the next life, but are very much qualities of the life we live here and now.

Isaiah is asking us to think about how we might participate in ushering in the year of the Lord's favor. This is a reference to the Year of Jubilee which occurred every fifty years when the land was allowed to lie fallow for a year and all debts were forgiven. The Year of Jubilee reset the economic dial and reminded people that time is marked by the Lord's gifts. The year expresses itself in two very positive directions: liberation and consolation. Liberation is from slavery, and also from enslavement to debt. Consolation transforms the way that one feels, from the way one exists: from mourning and sadness one passes to joy. Everything about this year, in country and city, comes not from personal initiative but from the Spirit of the Lord. It is a gift.

Perhaps we can take this ancient concept and reset 2021 to be a year of more compassion, more justice and righteousness, and joy as we lean into our covenant partnership with God during this season of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting and expectation. We can reflect upon ourselves and try to determine what we might be doing or not doing that prevents us from experiencing a Jubilee year, a transformed life. Where is God calling each one of us, and calling South Plains to lean into a future where restoration and salvation are realities and not just possibilities?

What if we stopped using plastic, disposable plates and cutlery? What if we stopped buying food that was wrapped in plastic containers? What if we used Zoom for most meetings instead of driving cars everywhere? That's leaning into the possibility of the environment being restored and the creatures of the oceans being saved. All of us know a gay family member, or an unwed mother, or someone who is in hospital, or an illegal immigrant. These are the ones who need the dial reset. If they don't feel compassion from us, where will it come from?

In John's gospel reading, the man sent from God knows that all the things that Isaiah has proclaimed have come to us in the flesh in Jesus Christ. It's important to note here that John, the man sent from God is NOT John the Baptist (as in Matthew) nor is he John the Baptizer (as in Mark). He is just plain John. He tells us more about who he is not, rather than who he is. He is not the Messiah, Elijah, nor the prophet. He is the one who testifies to the light but who is not himself the light.

Light plays an important role during the season of Advent when we wait in the darkness. The candles on the Advent wreath, the lights decorating yards, the lights on our own Christmas trees, the light from stars in our winter sky anticipate something. I think we wait for something profound and good to come to us, although the world right now may not reflect much goodness or positive reinforcement. As Christians we wait with faith, a radical trust in what God is doing even though we don't know how God might transform us or the world. Who could have imagined that a poor, young woman in the Middle East would bear a child who would bear light in all the dark places, including death? This child did not come dressed as a king, but as a vulnerable child swaddled in a manger in a stable.

Like Isaiah and John, we are to bear witness to this light, reminding the world that the darkest forces in the world are not finally as powerful as they appear. Rejoice always. God dwells among us. Amen.