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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
“Good News! He Comes to Us”
Year B – Third Sunday in Advent
December 17, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's Luke who records for us in the fourth chapter of his Gospel the very first act of Jesus' public ministry here on earth. Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth, and he went to worship at his local synagogue. And when it came time for the reading of Scripture, much like we have today in our worship services, Jesus stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled it, and he looked very specifically for certain passage. He looked for the passage from Isaiah chapter 61 (although there were no chapters then as we know them today), our Old Testament reading, and read it out loud:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (Luke 4:18-19).

This was a well-known Messianic prophecy, speaking about the coming of God's anointed one, and the good news of transformation that it means for God's people who are poor, captive, blind, and oppressed. It was important Jesus chose this passage.

He then rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the scroll attendant, and sat down to teach. And Luke describes the scene in a great way—“The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” You can picture it. Everyone straining to hear what Jesus has to say. The anticipation was heavy in the air.

And Jesus simply says, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Think about that. This promise of a Messiah and all that he would bring, this promise for which the people of Israel had been waiting for centuries, waiting for deliverance, and Jesus proclaims the time is now. It has been fulfilled. And *he* was the one who fulfills it.

Luke tells us there were mixed reactions to this. Some were marveling at his gracious words, but others were confused, and asked, “Is not this Joseph's son?” They all knew Jesus. This was his hometown. They had seen him grow up. They knew his parents. How could he say that he had *anything* to do with this Messianic prophecy? They couldn't understand who Jesus truly was, and what his arrival meant for them. Many chose, therefore, to overlook him, and what he had to say.

Advent is now more than half over. I'm still coming to grips with the fact that Advent is here, much less that Christmas is a week away. These days are busy. And time goes quick. And if we aren't careful, we'll miss what it is our Lord is saying *to us* this day. We'll miss what it is our Lord is saying about who he is, and what his arrival means for us.

This third Sunday in Advent, we are blessed to hear from John, who came to bear witness to the light of the world, that all might believe through him (John 1:7). John is the “voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (1:23). He points us to the Lamb, who takes away the sin of the world. He points us this Advent to Jesus, the one who is coming. In Advent, we prepare for the Messiah to arrive.

However, when the expected Messiah comes, do *we* overlook him, much like the people of Nazareth did? This busy season in Advent, are we paying attention to the words of John, the words of Jesus? Or are we too caught up in our own lives, with our own schedules? Are we listening to what Jesus says about himself, or do we say whatever it is *we* want to say?

The world has much to say about Jesus, about who *they* think he is. It started with, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” It’s a refusal to listen to the claims that Jesus makes about himself, specifically the claims that he has come in fulfillment of all Scripture to set his people free. Instead, for the world, Jesus becomes open to interpretation, each person being able to make their own assumptions about him that fit their preconceived notions.

Some will say he was just a man, just a son of Joseph. Any claim he supposedly made about being the Son of God, the Messiah and Savior of the world, well, that’s just an exaggeration, or false altogether. And it provides them an excuse simply to overlook him.

Some will say that he was at least a good, moral role model for us, teaching peace and love, and providing us an example by which we can shape our lives. He’s simply one of many voices we can listen to in order to achieve a fulfilling life.

Others will only admit that he’s just the person we’ve named a holiday after, and not think much about him beyond that. They’ll happily take their Christmas get-togethers, their paid vacation day, the fun and sentimentality the season brings, maybe even attend a Christmas Eve service, but then they move on, and simply wait for another year to start. Who Jesus actually is becomes completely inconsequential to their lives.

But when you hear what Jesus said about himself that day in the synagogue in Nazareth, your response can be only one of two things. Either you believe Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing by Jesus’ arrival, that he is the Christ sent to be the Savior of the world, or... it’s not. Either he is the Messiah who we anticipate in Advent, and celebrate at Christmas, or... he’s not.

There is no middle ground. There is no justifiable apathetic response. Even if many overlook him and make no attempt to determine whether he’s more than simply “Joseph’s son,” living as if he doesn’t matter is not a luxury that we can actually afford.

We can’t afford to put off the fact that He’s the son promised from heaven by an angel to both Joseph and Mary. That he’s Mary’s son *and* he’s the Son of God. That he’s the Word made flesh, the second person of the Trinity, the one begotten of his Father before all worlds, being of one substance with the Father from eternity, who descended to us and was incarnate, made man, to be crucified, to suffer, to be buried, but to rise again.

Today, from Isaiah and from Jesus himself, we hear that this man and this God, this God-man, is the one who came to a world that was lost in its imprisonment to sin. We were fettered by the curse of sin and our slavery to death and its darkness. But as John says, when Christ came, he was the light that scattered the darkness.

And Jesus is the one anointed, the Christ, who brings good news to the poor, who binds up the brokenhearted, who proclaims liberty to the captives, who opens the prisons to those who are bound, who proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor, and who comforts all who mourn (Isaiah 61:1-2). *This* is who Jesus is.

And because Jesus has come, to open the prison of sin by his death on the cross, and to bind up and heal our brokenness by his rising again, we are the full recipients of his Gospel. We hear this day that the Messiah has come for our eternal benefit. And in Advent, we also look forward to the day when he will come again, to finally put to an end all that separates us from him. This is what his arrival, both at Christmas, and again on the Last Day, means to us.

And in the meantime, in between his first and his second coming, let us not overlook him in the ways he comes to us right now. Although he ascended to heaven, he hasn't left us alone. Even in the midst of a busy season, in the busyness of our lives, let us not overlook the fact that he's here, among us as we gather. We hear his voice in His Word, his continual speaking to us. He gives of himself to us in his holy supper for the forgiveness of our sins and the strengthening of our faith. He strengthens our faith and sustains us until the day when he arrives again.

Because of who Jesus truly is, and what his arrival means for us, we know we can joyfully echo those words from Isaiah, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (61:10). In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord.