

## *The Spirit of the Lord God Is Upon Them*

Isaiah 61: 1-3, 8-11    Luke 1: 46-55

We've acknowledged in our journey this far into Advent that there is something stirring, something is afoot in God's agenda. We don't know what it is exactly, but the Spirit of God is moving, creating out of the void of darkness like it did in the beginning of creation. We know to be awake and alert in watchfulness. We know from prophetic voices that the times are changing. The promise of God is expected to be fulfilled. But how? In what way? Is it the time for a national messiah to restore the people to greatness among the nations? Is it a time of spiritual awakening and rededication to the ways of the Torah-Law? Or is it something else? Will God's plan for the creation be fulfilled? Will God's dream for God's people be fulfilled at last? While such questions swirl, the answers remain elusive.

But God's people have been in auspicious times before. While they await the clearer signs of God's intents, they can recall the stories of the past. They can recall the promise fulfilled in the unlikely parents Abraham and Sarah. They can recall the promise fulfilled in the incredible escape from Egyptian bondage. They can recall the promise fulfilled in the prosperous nation and its great institutions of royalty and its magnificent holy temple.

In the time of Third Isaiah, the people easily recall the promise fulfilled for them in the liberation from Babylon by God's messiah, Cyrus the Great of Persia. They can recall the heady days of returning from exile to the holy city once again. But 10-15 years later, in the era of Third Isaiah, the promise has been diminished as the people languish amid a ruined city and wrecked economy. They may be "home," but it has been a rude welcome.

A few have profited very well, but many are suffering, struggling, and dispirited. For the latter, the promise seems to have gone to others and they've been left behind. Apparently there were plenty of bad actors who had the system pretty well rigged to their benefit. People were suffering from exploiters and subject to violent repression. Hostile and narrow religious practices had also brought divisiveness to the community as people returned to the land from throughout the region, but not all were accepted.

Third Isaiah continues, expands, and re-phrases the wonderful expressions and eloquent teachings of Second Isaiah. This prophet emerges as a passionate, even radical voice for sacred values and renewed promise. Third Isaiah demands inclusion of all, protection for the weak, poor, and vulnerable, and promises a reversal of fortunes for God's struggling people.

He begins: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me ....* The prophet has a sacred message and is compelled to share it. The Spirit of the Lord God demands that he announce the word of the Lord.

He continues: ... *the Lord anointed me to preach good news to the poor, 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 to provide for those who grieve.*

The pain and burden of the present time is to be transformed, and the fortunes of God's people overturned with sacred power and blessing. The condemned will be freed, sustained, and known to be blessed by their God. Those ruined and despairing will be raised up and made whole. Those forgotten and lost will be bathed in light and embraced with delight. Those lowly and despised will be robed with righteousness and crowned with the favor of their Lord.

It is not a message of good news for the rich and powerful. The mention of "the day of vengeance" sounds ominous for those who have benefitted so handsomely from the current arrangements. It could (perhaps better) be translated as "the day of vindication," a time for reckoning with the calls for justice and equity and peace by those who have suffered. Their voices, long silenced or ignored, will now be heard and gain God's response.

The prophet also declares "the year of the Lord's favor." This term refers to the jubilee year, an ancient part of the Torah that called for a jubilee year every 50 years in which property and possessions were returned to the original owner. There is no evidence that it was ever practiced; you can imagine why. But it remained ensconced in the Torah-Law as a reflection of God's will for justice for those who had been deprived, more as an idea than anything else. But the prophet is announcing that "the year of the Lord's favor," the jubilee year, was upon them. Jubilee is paired with "the day of vindication;" the two go together – God's jubilee brings vindication to God's people. With these times coming, the condition of God's despairing people will be transformed.

The verses in-between go on at length about the change in the fortunes of God's people who can expect prosperity, respect, and joy in exchange for poverty, shame, and sadness.

When our text resumes, God is speaking. *For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity.* Justice is clearly the promise of God that is to be fulfilled.

This priority for justice would also seem to be the basis of a new covenant for God's people. It is this sacred justice that will make God's people noteworthy among all the other nations and peoples. Those others will acknowledge that the people of the Lord are indeed blessed by their God who brings them justice.

The last verses which take the first person "I" reflect the expression of God's hard-pressed people. *I delight greatly in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God.* The people see themselves clothed with *garments of salvation* and *arrayed in a robe of righteousness.* Here, salvation is not some other-worldly life after death guarantee. It is being saved in real life, in real time, from the thrall of despair and fatalism that has suffocated so many of God's people. The good news from the prophet is a breath of fresh

air, a wind of change that brings new life. Joy – our Advent theme for the third Sunday – comes in salvation from life's desperation, a triumph of justice, and the establishment of righteousness that will be admired by all people.

When we turn to the text in Luke about Mary, the passage known as the “Magnificat,” we don’t find our typical impression of Mary getting affirmed. You may want to hold off on that saintly halo. You may want to set aside the notion of a demure and delicate young woman. You may want to re-think the idea of her passive acceptance of her role as child-bearer for the Lord. Mary’s song tells another story that tradition would like to remain in Latin so that you don’t really understand what she’s saying.

At this point in Luke, having met cousin Elizabeth and sharing the excitement (and anxiety) of an unexpected pregnancy, we have Mary now in full recognition of the blessing of the Lord being borne within her. The Spirit of the Lord has been upon her.

She knows who she has always been in the past. She remarks that God *has been mindful of the humble state of his servant*. She has been and is a “nothing” and a “nobody.” Her lowly state makes her all the more joyful in her blessing. Before, she had been troubled and confused at the strange happenings. No longer. Her spirit is rejoicing. The Spirit of the Lord has been upon her, revealing just what God is doing. She gains a powerful vision and her song reveals the new things God is doing, the new world she beholds.

Stoked with passion like a prophet at what God would begin through her, she veritably pumps her fist, brimming with joy and power. In three verses, she echoes God’s mission priority of justice from Isaiah and the other prophets.

*He has shown strength with his arm;*

*he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;*

*he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.*

What a radical! She is clearly and candidly talking about the revolutionary overthrow of the social order, a virtual anarchist. Now, the context reminds us that she truly envisions how God will bring about God’s Kingdom of justice and peace. Yes, God’s Kingdom is a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order in every age. And Mary is excited and joyous about her pregnancy, and about her role in the unfolding promise of God.

Remember, we’re only in chapter 1 of the gospel of Luke. The gospel of Luke is just getting started, but already we have a radical gospel proclaimed, the good news of salvation and new life, of justice and peace, but the good news seems to bear the promise of turning everything upside down. The mighty, the proud, the rulers, and the rich all get a lesson in the ways of the Kingdom, a scared mission that aims to minister to the humble and the hungry, the homeless and the hopeless.

The only other mention we will have about Mary after this will come after the shepherds return from spreading the word about the birth when it says: *But Mary*

*treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.* She was digesting everything, and likely wrestling with it all. She knew enough that this may be a mixed blessing, for the one who serves God is engaged in dangerous work, particularly to accomplish what is foretold, bringing down the powerful and lifting up the poor.

Regardless, Mary gets it, and produces a picture for us that enables us to behold the very different meaning of this birth from what we're accustomed to, what we're expecting in the cute crèche of the comfortable class. Mary understands what we should understand; that God has an agenda that aims to establish justice, equity and peace for God's people. God has a love that liberates the underclass and downtrodden, bringing the light of hope, the joy of justice, and the blessing of new life to those who had endured darkness and despair.

The Spirit of the Lord God was upon both Isaiah and upon Mary. The Spirit of the Lord gave them a vision for the Kingdom of God's longing and promise. May we experience joy at the prospect of justice and peace as the Spirit of the Lord rests upon us in this season of anticipation for what God will do in our lives, in our time.