

**THE COMING LORD: THE JOY OF HIS COMING**

**Advent B3 – Isa 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps 126 or Luke 1:47-55;**

**1 Thess 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28**

**Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road**

**Plymouth, Michigan 48170**

**Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 12.15.02**

As I grow older there is something that bothers me more and more: *life is not fair*. I am not referring to the relatively minor injuries we suffer as children and so our parents say to us, “Life just isn’t fair.” I am referring to the major injustices of the world. I was born in a great country, raised in a good family, and blessed at an early age to know the grace of God. *And I did absolutely nothing to deserve all of this*. I read the newspaper comics almost every morning; many cannot even read. Every morning I fill my dog’s food bowl and water bowl, while starvation bloats the bellies of deprived children and safe drinking water is a luxury many do not enjoy. I traveled safely this morning to worship freely with people who pay me to speak on God’s behalf. *I am so blessed and I did nothing to deserve it*. Yet, I live in a world where AIDS will not only infect millions of children, it will also turn them into orphans; where in certain countries it is a crime to educate women; where barbaric rulers ride roughshod over the people entrusted to them; where war never ceases and where many of the wars are waged in the name of God. Oppression, exploitation, victimization—no human being should suffer these things. I believe that it is time as Americans to stop arguing about our rights and start accepting our responsibilities; to stop being selfish consumers and start being sensitive caregivers; to stop proclaiming our greatness and start practicing graciousness. I confess, I long for the coming of the Lord. Not for my sake; I’m living a blessed life. I long for the coming of the Lord for the multitudes throughout my world who will never enjoy in this life a life worth living. I want God to fix it all, and I want Him to fix it *now*! Yes, I know it is the Christmas Season, and I am thankful that Christ came to this world so that I would not

experience Hell in the next world. But I want Him to come again *now* so that others will not experience Hell in this world.

I realize that my thoughts for today are bleak and bothersome, but it is only as I reflect in this manner that I begin to sense the joy behind a text such as Isaiah 61. The Jewish exiles have returned from Babylon back to their homeland. Isa 61:1-4 reaches into the treasured tradition from two generations before and claims that the promise of Isaiah 40 of comfort and justice and of a special servant of the Lord who would bring this justice can now be applied to a new servant of the Lord. Like the previous servant in Isaiah 42, this new servant would receive the Lord's Spirit, would proclaim justice and comfort to the oppressed, would not seek his own self-interest but rather would seek "to display the LORD's glory," and would repair and restore the devastated and destroyed cities and communities. Isa 61:8-11 continues the theme of promise and strengthens it by pointing to the nature of God, the covenant of God, and the purposes of God. Let's read these verses.

<sup>1</sup>The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;

<sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;

<sup>3</sup>to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

<sup>4</sup>They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.

. . . .

<sup>8</sup>For I the LORD love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

<sup>9</sup>Their descendants shall be known among the nations,

and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

<sup>10</sup>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 robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

<sup>11</sup>For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations (NRSV).

This wondrous poem explores what true and deep joy is. Joy in this Isaiah scripture is not about personal pleasure; it is not some surface emotion of elation; it is not a superficial sentiment like “don’t worry, be happy”; and it is far more than the delight of a gift already unwrapped. *Joy in Isaiah 61 is rooted in a conviction and confidence that the struggles and setbacks of the present life will one day be resolved by a God who is faithful and who will not fail, no matter what.* Such joy knows the reality of unfair burdens and hardships, but it equally knows with unwavering assurance and unflinching hope that God is our rescuer and redeemer. God will not disappoint; He will deliver!

Isaiah’s song of deliverance soon became associated with the promise of a Messiah. In Jesus’ inaugural sermon in Nazareth at the beginning of His ministry in the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus stood in the synagogue and read this text from Isaiah 61. And then Jesus announced, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). By this proclamation Jesus affirmed that He was God’s Messiah who had come to save and set free the people of God. True to that promise, Luke reports the actions of Jesus: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (Luke 7:22).

*Jesus—He was, and is, Isaiah’s Spirit-filled and divinely-anointed servant of the LORD God. Jesus—He has come and He is coming.*

Life is not fair, but one day it will be! In view of what is certainly coming, how should we live in the here and now as we wait for the then and there? Let’s listen to what Paul has to say in 1 Thessalonians 5.

<sup>1</sup>Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. <sup>2</sup>For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. <sup>3</sup>When they say, “There is peace and security,” then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! <sup>4</sup>But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; <sup>5</sup>for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. <sup>6</sup>So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober . . .

. . . <sup>15</sup>See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. <sup>16</sup>Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup>pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup>give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. <sup>19</sup>Do not quench the Spirit. <sup>20</sup>Do not despise the words of prophets, <sup>21</sup>but test everything; hold fast to what is good; <sup>22</sup>abstain from every form of evil.

<sup>23</sup>May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>24</sup>The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this (NRSV).

As Paul comes to the close of his letter, he writes a series of injunctions—a string of short, to-the-point commands in verses 15-22. Paul’s concerns fall into three categories. *First, there is a call to a life of worship.* Rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving are not designated here as Sunday activities. Furthermore, they are each identified with repeated emphasis; “always,” “without ceasing,” “in all circumstances.” The totality of our lives is to be lived oriented to God. He is either God of all, or God not at all. I find it intriguing that verbs for worship are used rather than verbs like “obey,” “serve,” or “submit to.” All of life is to be characterized by joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. We may not be inclined to give thanks *for* all the circumstances of our lives, but Paul envisions no situation *in the midst of which* we cannot see expressions of God’s grace and give God thanks. Remember, the original readers had undergone considerable persecution (1 Thess 2:14-16). Perhaps this perspective is helpful in dealing with what I have called the unfairness of life. A life lived in relationship with God will still experience unfairness in this life, but that experience will be within an overall experience of joy, prayer, and thanksgiving.

*Second, there is a call to a life of discernment.* We must stay awake and keep our eyes open because there is deception and falsehood in this world. The church is called to be a community of moral discernment. We are to help one another in the making of moral decisions. The verbs throughout this passage as well as the second-person

pronouns are all plural. We are not called to stand alone, but to stand together and to support one another.

*Third, there is a call to a life of holiness.* Rather than a checklist of do's and don'ts, holiness comes through prayer and the spiritual support of the body of believers. Only God can "sanctify" us—make us holy. And only God can keep us "blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." Sanctification is first and foremost the work of God, and He guarantees a positive response to a prayer for holiness.

It is the Season of Advent, and today we rejoice because Christ has come. He came to give us a meaningful and abundant life: a life to be lived *in spite of* and *in the midst of* the unfairness of this world. Being a Christian changes the way you see the world. And if everyone were a Christian, it would change the world we see. We also rejoice because Christ is coming. He is coming to take us from this world into the next world. The coming world, there is only one thing "unfair" about it: we don't deserve it. That is why it is the gift of God. And that is "the reason for the season."

---

Brueggemann, Walter; Cousar, Charles B.; Gaventa, Beverly R.; Newsome, James D.  
*Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year B.*  
Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993.

Craddock, Fred B.; Hayes, John H.; Holladay, Carl R.; Tucker, Gene M. *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B.* Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1993.

Van Harn, Roger E., ed. *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts.* 3 vols. Grand Rapids/London: Eerdmans/Continuum, 2001.