Advent – Isaiah 61 – 15 December 2024

This Advent we are taking some promises from the book of Isaiah and looking at them through the lens of Jesus. These passages have been giving us glimpses of God's great plan. This week, through the poem that is Isaiah 61, we get to really draw back the curtain and see what God had in store from the beginning.

We have had some wonderful imagery already this Advent.
David two weeks ago shared the image from Isaiah 11 of a shoot coming from the stump of Jesse. Despite what had been cut down, there was hope of new life. Our first candle of Advent lit that week was Hope.

Kath last week, shared an image from Isaiah 40, of a royal entrance, a way being made for God. His arrival brings the end of suffering, brings forgiveness, and reconciliation. Our second candle of Advent lit last week was peace.

This week, as you know, the third candle that has been lit represents JOY.

In my Advent reading this morning, under the heading of 'What is Joy?' Cynthia Shafer-Elliot had written,
"In the Bible, joy is portrayed as a profound spiritual state that transcends mere happiness, [it's] rooted in a deep relationship with God. Unlike fleeting emotions tied to external circumstances, biblical joy arises from recognising God's presence and work in our lives. It is described as a fruit of the Spirit, indicating that true joy results from living in alignment with God's will."

In the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, it starts this Isaiah 61 poem with:
The spirit of my Sovereign GOD is upon me,
Because GOD has anointed me.
I have been sent as a **herald of joy** to the humble…

Advent is a time of waiting. Anticipation. Hope. It is not hope in anything that we can do in our own effort or by our own goodness. This hope is founded in God's faithfulness. His trustworthiness.

So, this morning, I want to give some Biblical context for this poem, our passage today, Isaiah 61.
There has been some significant movement for God's people across the passages we have heard these last few weeks. God's people were exiled to Babylon. The Babylonian Empire was later conquered by the Persian Empire, and it's king, Cyrus, released the Jewish people back to their homeland, Judah.
However. The initial joy has faded by the time we get to our poem in Isaiah 61. Jerusalem's city walls were broken, the temple had been razed, farmland had been abandoned. God's people needed to rebuild the infrastructure, as well as find a way of doing community life. There was a heaviness to this long-awaited return.

This is a people who had been captured and taken from their homeland, their whenua. Research has shown that trauma can reverberate through generations. It is not just carried in the stories passed down, but also in the DNA.

This is a people who have been broken hearted, who have been imprisoned, who have mourned deeply for who and what they have lost.

Isaiah 60-62 is a series of poems that announce God's plan for His people.
God was unveiling his plan to a grieving community.

VOCATION

Through the pages of Scripture, we see that God has always given His chosen people work to do. That includes us today. We have a vocation. A job to do.

God gave Adam and Eve a vocation.
Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, to be image-bearers of God. They were to reflect God's character and goodness. To expand the flourishing of Eden throughout the earth.

But sin entered the narrative.
Adam and Eve rebelled. They failed to reflect God's image, His character. They failed in their stewardship of creation.
Then they hid from God, and they hid from each other.
They could not remain in Eden.
Exiled.
Disconnected from God and one another.

This fall, in Genesis 3, kicks off a chain reaction of fractured relationships, escalating violence, and systematic injustice, culminating in Genesis 11 with the tower of Babel, mankind trying to create their own Eden without God.

After the resulting confusion of languages and scattering of humanity,
God later set up a covenant with a single man, Abraham.
Abraham's descendants would be a large nation that would bring great blessing to all other nations.

Abraham's family later ended up in slavery in Egypt for 400 years. After their great rescue, the Exodus, they gathered at the foot of Mt Sinai. God entered a covenant with His chosen people, so that they might be a kingdom of priests, a light to all nations, and they would proclaim God's glory. They had a job to do, a vocation.

NT Wright wrote in Matthew for Everyone, *“Israel isn’t chosen in order to be God’s special people while the rest of the world remains in outer darkness. Israel is chosen to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth. Israel is chosen so that, through Israel, God can bless all people."*

However, we see Abraham's family, God's chosen people, the Israelites, they fail to uphold their vocation.

As we read through the history accounts in the Old Testament we repeatedly find fractured relationships, violence, and systematic injustice.

Instead of living out the vocation of being a blessing, a light to all nations, proclaiming God's glory, God's people came to look like the pagan nations around them.

Despite the calls back to holy living by God's prophets, Israel continued in her disobedience.

Israel, like Adam and Eve, failed to live up to her vocation.
Exiled. Disconnected from God and one another.

It is clear that we, humanity alone cannot save ourselves. We try to build our own Eden without God, but we fall short. Every. Time.

Back to Isaiah 61, there was that remnant who had returned to Judah after exile. The land has been desolated. They must restore the city walls, rebuild the temple, and replant the land.

In Isaiah 61, God promises someone who can renew creation.
To rescue humanity from itself.

Humanity needed a Messiah.

Isaiah's poem describes seven acts of new creation. This anointed Messiah, Jesus Christ our King, will come:

1. To bring good news (joy) to the poor;
2. To comfort the broken-hearted,
3. To proclaim that captives will be released and prisoners will be freed.
4. To to tell those who mourn that the year of the Lord's favour has come, and with it, the day of God's vengeance against their enemies; *(**The year of the Lord's favour**: This is a reference to the ancient Israelite practice of the year of Jubilee, when debts are cancelled, slaves and prisoners are freed, and families regain their ancestral land*. ***The Day of Judgement/Vengeance** is bad news for those who unjustly harm others).*
5. To all who mourn in Israel, he will give a crown of beauty for ashes,
6. and a joyous blessing instead of mourning.
7. they will be like great oaks that the Lord has planted for his own glory.

This is so much more than just a glimpse of God's great plan.
It's a picture of God's character and goodness. He will not abandon his people to fractured relationships, violence, and systematic injustice.

So now, let's fast forward 700 years. There were still some Jewish people who held onto these promises. That a Messiah would come to free Israel from her enemies.

This people group still knew the oppression of empire.
The Persians had dismantled Babylon, yes. But it was still an empire.
The Persians were followed by the Greek Empire.
The Greek Empire was followed by Roman Empire.

How can anyone overthrow a whole empire?
Surely, they would need to be a miliary leader, like King David, powerful enough to pour out judgement and punishment upon Israel's enemies.

MANIFESTO
Let's move forward to Luke 4, which we heard in the proclamation this morning. Jesus launches his public ministry in his hometown, reading this poem from Isaiah.

Luke 4:16-21

In Lisa Sharon Harper's book, The Very Good Gospel, she says, "*It is a proclamation that the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed will be restored to full dignity."* She goes on to say that the reversal of the fall is imminent, and creation will be restored.

Jesus told those sitting in that synagogue, (and Luke recorded for us) that the promise of Isaiah 61, God's great plan, was fulfilled in Jesus.
Jesus is proclaiming good news. He is heralding Joy. What a manifesto!

The vocation that Adam and Eve had failed, Jesus Christ our King fulfilled. What Israel and her patriarchs, priests, kings, and prophets couldn't do. Jesus did.

Through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus undid evil and conquered death. Jesus recreates. He restores, rebuilds, and replants. He is the new shoot from the stump of Jesse. It is Jesus that John Baptist was preparing a way for.

I wonder when we start our Advent journey with our focus on a baby in a manger if the weightiness might pass us by. We have a God that so desires to be in relationship with us, His people, created in His image, that not only would He extend mercy, time and time again as we stumble and fall into patterns of fractured relationships, violence, and injustice.

But He would also enact the plan (that has been on the table since the beginning). An upside-down plan that would look like defeat to the enemy. A Messiah, but not one of military might, but incarnated as a vulnerable baby.
God's Word made flesh;
this is Emmanuel.
God with us.

Karl Barth in Deliverance for the Captives said, "*He does not need us. He could very easily do without us. [But] he is deeply moved by our need of him, our bitter, inescapable need.* ***Is*** *this perhaps the casualness and condescension of a great ruler, occasionally bending down to the man in the street?*
Not in the least.
He takes our place and surrenders himself for us, thereby binding himself to us and compromising himself once for all. He is the God of Christmas of whom we sing:
"A tiny child and poor He came to give us mercy's blessing." This is the height and depth, the ultimate and eternal power and glory of the almighty Lord; He has mercy on us."

Before we leave Isaiah 61 today. Let's take another look at our final verses.

Let's not miss what God says of these ones that he will comfort and liberate:

Isaiah 61:4-7

Rescued from darkness to light by Jesus - who dwells in us, and gifts us Holy Spirit.
Jesus, our high priest, he duplicates himself.
God's redeemed people would be made priests.
In the Jewish Tanakh it calls these priests, *'Servants of God'.*
Bearing God's image. Reflecting God's character and goodness. They will co-rule with God in the restoring, the rebuilding and the replanting of this world.

NT Wright, from his book The Day the Revolution Began wrote,
"What the Bible offers is not a "works contract," but a covenant of vocation. The vocation in question is that of being a genuine human being, with genuinely human tasks to perform as part of the Creator's purpose for His world. The main task of this vocation is "image-bearing," reflecting the Creator's wise stewardship into the world and reflecting the praises of all creation back to its maker. Those who do so are the "royal priesthood," the "kingdom of priests," the people who are called to stand at the dangerous but exhilarating point where heaven and earth meet."

Because of Christ the King in us, we get to co-rule alongside God in recreation.
This is our vocation.
Instead of participating in fractured relationships, violence, and injustice.
We can restore, rebuild, and replant.

This Advent, may we:
Bring good news/Herald Joy to the humble;

Comfort up the broken-hearted,
Proclaim release to captives and freedom to prisoners;
Proclaim the year of jubilee
Comfort all who mourn,

And the result, Isaiah tells us is ever lasting joy!!

PRAY