

Sunday December 17th, 2023

Advent III

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

“Deck the Halls”

I have no idea why, but many scam artists seem to be at work during the Christmas season. Maybe they believe we are more gullible as a population after we have drunk some eggnog. One scam I read about concerns a fellow who is selling what he called an "Elixir for Immortality" in town. He came to me, suspiciously, with some of those bottles, but I refused, and contacted the police. They told me they knew of this scam, and this person. They said they've already arrested him multiple times for his scam. Last year, then also in 2003, and in 1975, 1912, 1875 and 1813.

It might be the current economic crisis, or the looming questions about opening things up after the pandemic, but there seems to be a deluge of promises to pass on mounds of money “with no strings attached”. That is, if you simply reply to the email. Most of the emails end up in the spam folder, but some get through. Lots of them get through. And there are basically two types: “You are a winner!” which then tries to get us to respond because the check is waiting – and “I chose you, dear friend,” which then tries to tell us someone died and left scads of cash and to help disburse it, they need my email reply, and bank account number to get the ball rolling.

Well, we’ve done enough reading, and have lived long enough, to recognize a scam when we see it. But you might consider adding up all the cash being offered over the past few weeks, and discovering that if all the offers were legitimate, they would generate enough money to resurrect a broken economy. It is so much money that it is easy to see how some people get sucked into it. “Maybe,” they think, “maybe this one is real.

Maybe there is someone, a Nigerian Prince perhaps, out there just waiting to pass on hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars to a random email address. Maybe. And they just happened to choose mine. Maybe I did enter a contest in a foreign country I’ve never been to. Could happen. Couldn’t it?” The worrying thing is that there are so many for whom that is a logical argument, or maybe an act of desperation.

Things are tough out there. Every day, it seems, we read of another company going out of business, another spate of layoffs, (1700 just recently from Spotify) other signs of a shutdown hurting local business, another front page full of disheartening news. Desperate times seem to call for desperate solutions. Isaiah understood desperation. The people in the latter part of this multi-themed prophetic tome understood it anyway.

There are at least two moods in Isaiah – the first half, when things were going well for the people as a nation, there was a theme of warning and judgement. Pay attention, the prophet said repeatedly. Look at what you are doing to one another. Look at how you are living; look at the source of your wealth; look at the foundations of your society. Does your socio-economic system reflect your status as a people of God?

The second half of the book speaks to desperate people, after the exile, who have lost it all, who are hungry and afraid and homeless; they are refugees, without status or rights. Now the mood shifts, the tone of the book is starkly different. Now it is a word of hope; it is a promise. It is a call to live - even in desperate times – to live by a different standard.

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Look at our Scripture reading for this third Sunday of Advent:

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; 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

3 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. 4 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 (Isaiah 61:1-4).

Excuse me. Things are bad, take our word for it. How can the prophet come to these people and say . . . what? Good news. Good news for the oppressed, good news for the brokenhearted, good news to captives and prisoners, good news to those who mourn. Great. What is this good news? What do they get? Garlands, oil, a mantle. Uh, what? Where is the promise of wealth and goods? Where is the “you may have won” email that tells us we could be set for life with no more effort than hitting reply? Where are the goods?

God comes to people who are desperate, and tells them to do something we love to do at this time of year; decorate. It doesn't seem right. It doesn't seem enough. Decorations are nice and all, but they hardly serve to make things better. Yard blowups are not going to change my circumstance. They can hardly be counted on to change the world. Can they? Why do we bother, in the end? Are we just shouting in the darkness?

Well, yes, in a way we are. It may surprise you to learn that shouting in the darkness is a noble profession. It is a calling. When we shout, when we decorate our homes and our churches, we are not saying that we are unaware of difficulties, we are not saying that we are oblivious to bad news, but we are saying that we choose to live by good news. We are saying that we choose to live by hope and not despair.

Not in a Pollyanna kind of way like what transpired in a hospital lately. Where a doctor said to his nursing assistant: “I think the patient is dying. What's his blood type?” The nurse replied: “B positive.” The doctor then replied: “Okay. I think the patient is going to make it.” It's not enough to indulge in positive self-talk.

But what keeps this from becoming a rose-colored glasses scenario is the prophetic call to act in hope. Look back at Isaiah's words. The Lord brings the good news, the Lord through the prophet – proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. But then we are the ones who bind up hearts; we are the ones who set people free; we are the ones who rebuild. We work because we believe. We build because we hope. And because we hope, we are blessed.

John wants us to hope. Both Johns in the bible do. John the Gospel writer and John the Baptist. But both Johns know that the only way to do that is to look beyond. John the Baptist is introduced in the gospel as seemingly the first human being in the story. But he is presented in a way as to point beyond himself to the one who comes.

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John 1:6-8 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

These verses seem so out of character from the ones that surround them, that some scholars have assumed they were misplaced or a later addition – which they may be. On the other hand, they might be where they are for precisely the reason that they serve to point beyond the named person to something greater, something brighter. John the Baptist was not the light. Just like you are not the light, we are not the light. But we light the lights so that the true light can be seen.

In the second part of the Gospel text, John continues to point beyond himself. I am not the messiah. This seems a simple and obvious statement. Yet how often do we need to repeat this phrase for ourselves? “I’m not the messiah!” It’s a good phrase to remember. Especially when we add it to the other task that John reveals. He is the one preparing the way. He is the one who can recognize the messiah when he sees him. He is the one getting people ready.

He is decking their halls. Isaiah does it with garland and oil; John does it with water. But it is part of the preparation, part of the declaration waiting for the one who comes. We are preparing our space, preparing our hearts, preparing our world for the one who comes. With decorations, yes, but mostly with acts of love and service. Our preparation for the company that is coming is a proclamation and invitation. We practice receiving the Savior by receiving the ones the Savior saved. Our company is always both/and, not either/or. We don’t wait for the return of the Christ by excluding others. We acknowledge them as a part of the company for whom we wait.