

The 2nd Sunday after Christmas

Isa. 61

Mat. 2:19ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+.

It is generally not advisable to make assumptions, especially about what others think, desire, or believe, but I am going to take a risk with something far simpler; that is that most of you know or have heard the Christmas song, “Do You Hear What I Hear”. It is not a hymn of the Church. The lyrics are uncomplicated but poignant and imagines how the events of Christmas might be heard by the whole of creation. The night wind with voice asks a lamb, “Do you see a star?”, and the lamb asks the shepherd boy, “Do you hear a song?”, and he in turn asks a mighty king, “Do you know about this newborn child?”. The king’s response is simply to ask people everywhere to pray for peace. It is a catchy little song. What is interesting is it was written in 1962 in the midst of the nuclear crisis, serious political unrest—I watched my great uncle dig a bomb shelter in the side of the hill between his and my grandparent’s houses, so a time of substantial anxiety. Even more what is strikingly ironic is that it was a call from secular music to seek what the Messiah comes to deliver.

As we come to the close of the Advent-Christmas cycle it might be worthwhile to consider just what we have actually heard and seen ourselves in our worship, prayers, and service. In MP we have heard the prophets chide God (see Psalm 44—Rouse thyself! Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face?) and ask God for a Messiah. We have seen people wait a long time for hope and be called to patient waiting. We have heard the Baptist’s call for careful introspection as well as justice, Herod react with brutal power, and Zechariah sing with joy at the promise of a child. Finally, there is Mary, who must have had her life and mind stretched to its limits, YET in trust saw God’s hand at work bringing joy and light to a very dark world. What did all of those players in this great story see, and hear, and come to know? And now, **have we joined with them?** Do we see and know what they have seen? If so, what difference is it making?

Today we hear the words of the prophet Isaiah, who speaks incredible poetic images of hope and restoration; “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has anointed me to proclaim Good News to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, to appoint, to give...”. But this string of infinitives—of action-oriented phrases—was directed to a people who had been through exile, loss of all, and returned home, to live in a place of devastation where the graciousness of Yahweh must have seemed at best a faintly remembered time or a very dim shimmer of light. Go read chapter 62 to get a glimpse of where they had lived. They are called by degrading names—Desolate and Forsaken but will now be called “Married and the Delight of the Lord.” Perhaps to really catch the power of these promises it is necessary to stand in our places of devastation, or alongside others whose lives seem to have nowhere to go. The promises of God are sung out for those whose lives resemble the ruins of a great edifice with only rubble remaining. Given our last year or so I am not convinced we are far afield from the condition of those who heard these words of promise. If you are or have stood in such places, physically, emotionally, spiritually, where trust is thin and the future occluded, then the words of Isaiah carry real potency, if believed.

In 1976-1977 the part of Tennessee in which we lived experienced a winter unlike anything recalled in decades. Being a mid-south state, an occasional snowfall and days below freezing were

an event to be enjoyed or at least tolerated. But in this year the microclimate of the area took a different turn. The first snow started a few days after Christmas and then once or twice a week snow would fall again. The average temperatures for January were in the mid-20's and February were not different. The schools remained closed for so long that the children had to attend on Saturdays and still continued to do so up into late June to make up lost days. The state ran out of salt so scraping them merely packed things deeper. Days remained cloudy for extended periods to the point that everything, including the mood of the people, became gray; like being enveloped in dust. It literally seeped into every aspect of life. To this day I cannot imagine how people in upstate New York manage year after year. But what stands out most clearly is what happened when mid-March arrived, and the snow finally began to clear, and patches of yellowed grass showed thru. How can you get excited about yellow grass and a few moments of sunshine? Those were like a gift that lightened everyone and made us realize new life would spring forth.

In a similar but far more powerful way the words from Isaiah captured and continue to capture the attention of people living in a dust covered existence. It is therefore no accident, according to St. Luke, that Jesus' first sermon initiating his ministry was to read these words in the synagogue at Nazareth. But then he goes one step further, and it is an ultimate step. He says to all within audible distance, "Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" . . . Do you hear what I hear? What was hoped for in Advent and what has been delivered to us in Christmas is a person who in his life and ministry, his steadfastness with the poor and outcast, and his death and resurrection becomes and delivers what the words of Isaiah promise; the time of God's favor. Luke tells us the crowd is so offended by Jesus' comments that they want to push him off the edges of the town! Why would you resist the promises? Because this promise is the one that upsets the balance and status quo of the world-including ours. We have all known people who cannot quite seem to be happy unless someone else isn't, or for whom what is owned or had is not enough unless it is more than others have. And we know full well there are those who manipulate economies or systems without regard for the damage done to others for the sake of their own positions. Jesus challenges the world as it is, by promising more.

The 'year of the Lord's favor' refers to the Jubilee Year mandated in Leviticus. It was extraordinary in its reach and grace. A Jubilee Year meant that all debts were erased—paid or unpaid. All prisoners were set free. All injustices made right. It was like hitting the re-set button and getting to start over fresh without the dragging pain of the past. And please notice there are no favorites here—we are all included. The vengeance of God Isaiah points toward is not revenge (getting even) on the world, but God's unseating of that which has made the world unjust, out of balance, and inflicted harm. As Mary saw and sings in the Magnificat—"He has put down the mighty from their seat and has exalted the humble and poor." No wonder the world, socially, economically, politically flinches in the face of this season. Who have we been given at Christmas other than the One who gives God's favor?!

There is an incident that took place shortly after World War II involving Francis Pickens Miller. Miller was a great churchman and a statesman. At that time he was in charge of an American military unit in Germany. A lieutenant in his command had a meeting with his Soviet counterpart, who asked the American lieutenant if he had ever read Karl Marx. The lieutenant said he had. In response, the Soviet officer said, "Then you know how history will come out." Miller heard about this encounter and wished he could have asked the Russian, "Have you ever read the New Testament? If you have, then you know how the future will come out."

SERMON – SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS – 3 JANUARY 2021

St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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The story is not over. What leads to this conclusion for the early Church was not the NT's accounting of history, but its sense of the living presence of Christ who is the end and culmination of history—the Alpha and Omega.

One of the questions which should cling to our hearts, minds, and souls, is this: has the gift of Christ to us at Christmas left an imprint, a stamp, an indelible mark on us as a community that calls upon God at every turn of life in this moment of our history? Does it help us to yearn for and seek the justice and favor of God, not only for ourselves, but for all Christ comes to redeem and save? My friends, the joy of Christmas is not a cheap dime store gift from heaven. It is the deep heartfelt resonance of God who enters every dark place we have known and stands with us. The beauty found in Isaiah's lyrics derives from the same place that we experience suffering and desire. It comes from having struggled in the world and yet having found something that runs deeper, stronger, and more certain than human failure—It is the presence and succour of God found in his son. Do you hear what I hear? Amen+