

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

^{61:1} 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.

Commentary

Isaiah 61 is a poem with one central theme: the righteous afflicted are to be recompensed. They will be glorious among the nations as a people whom God has blessed. All five terms in verses 1-2 (oppressed, broken-hearted, captives, prisoners, mourners) are synonyms for the righteous victims who have been unjustly kept from their reward. This announces the year of the Lord's favor (jubilee) when God rights all wrongs. Jubilee is an ancient Hebrew tradition specifying that every fiftieth year (among other things) land was to be returned to its original owners, slaves freed, and debts forgiven. After God redeems the afflicted, all nations will see that they are specially graced.

Reflection

How can you and your church be a means of sharing God's good news in new ways with such persons mentioned in this passage?

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

^{5:16} Rejoice always, ¹⁷ pray without ceasing, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹ Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰ Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹ but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²² abstain from every form of evil. ²³ 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. ²⁴ The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Commentary

Paul praised the Thessalonians for enduring tribulation, which is part of a cosmic struggle between the gospel and evil, and encouraged and consoled them over the death of some of their members (perhaps victims of persecution). He urged them to persevere and live ethical Christian lives while awaiting the return of Christ. Paul turns in this reading from ethical to religious concerns. Anxious about their community life, he urges them to respect their community leaders and to support one another. In this spirit, he offered a blessing and benediction that truly intended to offer shalom—peace—to both individuals and the world.

Reflection

As you examine yourself in Advent preparation, how would you rate your faithfulness in regard to both Paul's criteria and your own?

John 1:6-8, 19-28

^{1:6} There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

^{1:19} This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing

if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Commentary

The ultimate concern for the Fourth Evangelist is with God. His good news is the revelation of God in Jesus. We miss the Gospel's central claim if we focus exclusively of Jesus' earthly life: Jesus is God incarnate—the Word, the light, the one who existed with God before creation. The interrogators are identified here as the Pharisees, and during Jesus' lifetime, they were only one of many groups of Jewish religious leaders; but by the time of John's gospel, their successors, the rabbis, had become dominant. The Evangelist is making a link between the authorities who opposed Jesus and those who opposed the Johannine community in the late first century.

Reflection

Whom do you say Jesus is? What does he mean to you?

Psalm 126

^{126:1} When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

² **Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;**
then it was said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."

³ **The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.**

⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵ **May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.**

⁶ Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
**shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.**

Closing Prayer

Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.