

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Third Sunday in Advent (Series B)

December 14, 2014

Text: Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11, John 1:6–8, 19–28

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Isaiah preached one of the most beautiful and powerful messages in all of Scripture. It's recorded in Isaiah 61. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." That Spirit-anointed person will do the following nine things: bring good news to the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim liberty to captives, open the prisons, proclaim the year of God's favor, proclaim God's day of vengeance, comfort those who mourn, give clothing of rejoicing instead of the garb of mourning, and give the oil of gladness to those in sorrow (vs. 1–3). Wow! That's a tall order for anyone.

But notice how this person goes about doing these glorious things: the Spirit of the Lord. Isaiah is describing the divine work of grace and salvation to be accomplished through the Holy Spirit. But who is this Spirit-anointed person? Isaiah doesn't say explicitly in this particular text. In fact, the person who will be doing these great things is the one speaking through Isaiah – "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me"; the prophet is but the mouthpiece allowing this Spirit-anointed person to speak.

A nine-fold promise is given. And God's people wait in faith and hope. That's a virtue in short supply nowadays. Waiting. And yet, the Bible declares that goodness and blessings will be given to those who wait on the Lord. Isaiah writes in 40:31, "but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint." Waiting on God doesn't drain strength and holy resolve but rather increases it.

This is one of many occasions that the teaching of Scripture conflicts with the teachings of the world. We are told in so many different ways that we should expect and demand immediate gratification. Food, sex, emotions, friendship, intelligence, you name it. Fulfillment can be had almost immediately. Most of you know I enjoy language, grammar, syntax, and all that nerdy stuff. I find most amusing the ads that say you can learn a foreign language in 10 days without learning grammar, memorizing vocabulary, or performing boring drills. Emotions can be altered by medication. Sexual fulfillment can be had without the bothersome work of marital

commitment or even the inconvenient possibility of children. Food from around the world can be ordered with a few clicks of a button and be at your doorsteps in a few short days. Who wants to bother with that flesh and blood person once called a friend or neighbor or family member when you can have hundreds (thousands?) of virtual friends. You get the point. Some of these things aren't wrong in themselves, some obviously are, but we live in a climate that says waiting and sacrificing and hoping are for losers. Personal discipline, arduous work, selfless sacrifice and spiritual devotion are outmoded means of growth and expression.

In Luke 21:19, the Lord Jesus teaches us that in our patience or endurance we possess our souls. And the apostle Paul teaches in both Romans and I Corinthians that we Christians wait for the coming of the Lord Jesus and the glorification of the resurrection. In waiting we find strength. Dear people of God, may the Lord Jesus strengthen you as you await the glory of your eternal inheritance.

For 800 years, God's people waited and drew strength from God's promises recorded in Isaiah 61. When will this Spirit-anointed Savior come and make good on His promises? John the Baptist enters into human history. There was much speculation surrounding him. The gospel of John (this would be John the apostle) simply writes, "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (vs. 6). Might he be the one? He's one sent from God, after all. The next verses say this about John the Baptist, "He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light..." (vs. 7–9).

The gospel lets us know upfront that John isn't the one. Instead, he's called a witness 3 times (vs. 7–8). A witness speaks about the event or person in question. But the witness isn't the primary concern. The witness speaks about something or someone else. In this case, John the Baptist gives witness to the light; the light coming into the world to dispel and conquer the darkness of sin, Satan, and evil. John the Baptist is not the Spirit-anointed Messiah of Isaiah; he is not the fulfillment of God's nine-fold promise. God's people will wait and prepare a bit longer. But strength will increase.

As a witness, John gives testimony. It's a curious testimony, recorded for us in vs. 19–23. Priests and Levites from Jerusalem are very curious about John the Baptist. He's preaching in the desert and baptizing people in the Jordan River. All this religious activity and John didn't even check in with the religious authorities in Jerusalem!

So they question John. Who are you? The Christ? No. The prophet Elijah? No. The prophet promised by Moses? No. Ever had a conversation like that? You know how it goes. You're at a social event and trying to engage in conversation with a stranger. You ask questions only to get short, one-word answers with no follow-up. It can be very frustrating.

John just isn't giving them any information about himself. Finally, in great exacerbation, they say, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" (vs. 22). Alright, if you must know something, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (vs. 23). I am a voice, says John.

In a way, John is saying to them, "Why aren't you listening to what I'm preaching? I'm a voice preaching a message. Listen to the message!" You see that's what a witness does, gives voice to the event in question. John is not the Spirit-anointed Christ but he is the voice preparing the way so that the Christ can do His saving work.

I want to pause for a few moments and consider our work of witnessing to the person and work of the Lord Jesus. John was a voice testifying to Jesus. Have we lost our voice? It's something we need to consider in light of our changing culture, in light of the great need the people in our community have for the Lord Jesus.

As you already know, Jesus is the one who fulfills the nine promises of Isaiah 61. I've hinted at that throughout this sermon. Now I'll say it directly, Jesus is the Spirit-anointed Christ who gives everything promised by Isaiah. Can you think of anyone who needs good news of eternal significance, who needs healing, liberty, release from past sins and failures, who needs to know and experience God's favor, who must be warned that God's judgment is coming, who needs comfort and rejoicing instead of sorrow, who needs to be clothed and anointed with heaven-sent joy? Or to put it simply albeit bluntly...Do you know anyone who needs Jesus?

Is it possible that God could use you as the voice to bring Jesus to them? Remember, you aren't the main thing. You give witness to someone else, to the Lord Jesus.

As you well know, I am not one who uses guilt or fear tactics when it comes to living our daily lives of faith and obedience to Jesus. But I must encourage you to find your voice again. Witness to Jesus who brings light, joy, salvation, peace, forgiveness, healing and restoration to a broken and fallen world.

John the Baptist gives us the example to follow when testifying. When the representatives of the Pharisees asked John why he was preaching and baptizing, he simply told them about Jesus, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (vs. 26–27). You see, our testimony isn’t really about ourselves but about the One greater than all. It’s about Jesus. When asked why you pray, why you give of your precious time every Sunday morning to go to church, or Bible study on Tuesdays/Wednesdays, why you volunteer your time for church activities and why give of your money, why live a life of goodness and virtue, you simply witness to Jesus.

I don’t know why the lectionary doesn’t include vs. 29–30 for they give the explicit content of John’s witness to Jesus. “The next day [John] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me.’” Our witness is always on Jesus who takes away our sins and does everything promised by Isaiah and all the prophets of God.

I know people may ask difficult questions about our faith, about the Bible, Christian history, and so forth. They may do so with the intent of silencing your voice. But remember this, if nothing else today, we testify to Jesus. You aren’t the focus. Jesus is. He’s God’s Lamb who takes away sins, opens eyes to faith, gives faith in place of unbelief, joy instead of sadness, release instead of captivity, etc.

You are the voice of Jesus in your spheres of influence. May your voice ring with the beauty and clarity of Good News. Jesus is our hope and our joy. Upon Him we wait and draw strength.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.