

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by The Rev. James B. Craven, III on Sunday, December 11, 2011.

In the name of God-Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Most Biblical scholars, with good reason, now believe that the Old Testament book of Isaiah was written by at least two authors and perhaps three. The portion of Isaiah we just heard likely dates from the captivity in Babylon or Iraq, 2500 odd years ago when the exiled were longing for home in Jerusalem and this Isaiah was writing and preaching about the liberation and return that was at hand. It is a well known passage. Luke tells us Jesus read it in the synagogue at Nazareth:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it is written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

This is powerful stuff. It was powerful and meaningful to the exiled of Israel who first heard it in Babylon. It was powerful and meaningful to those who heard it in the synagogue at Nazareth 500 years later, and it has power and meaning for us today, another 2000 years down the line. A message that retains its vitality and urgency for 2500 years is worth some pondering, for the human needs addressed in it have little changed.

The Lord has anointed me. Isaiah was a prophet called by God. Samuel anointed David. Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anointed Solomon. Jesus was baptized by John. Two weeks ago a baby, Gretchen Johnston, was baptized here and anointed with holy oil. She was thereby charged with a leadership role as Christ's faithful follower, though it will be awhile before she really takes all that in. We all of us have a job to do, and Isaiah outlines it nicely for us.

We are to bring the good news to the oppressed. This can be fraught with danger. Newt Gingrich learned that recently when he said "Look, you have a family that crossed the border without proper papers maybe 30 years ago. They have lived here, worked, belonged to a church, paid taxes, raised American children, truly contributed to their community. We're going to deport them? Surely

not.” To a man and a woman, every one of his Dancing with the Republican Stars competitors said “Yes, indeed. Deport them.” Not even “Give us Barabbas.” Now, I’m no particular Newt fan. I don’t even know him, or any of his three wives, but he got that one right. We must remember too that the Holy Family crossed into Egypt undocumented.

We are, Isaiah and Christ tell us, to bring good news to the poor. Let’s not be too literal with that one. What they had in mind is not, I suggest, approaching those in line to get into a homeless shelter on a freezing Christmas Eve and singing out “Unto you is born this day in the City of David a savior who is Christ the Lord.” That is good news, to be sure, but Isaiah and Jesus I have a feeling were thinking more of tangible good news. Food, clothing, shelter, medication, employment. Those have been the big five for centuries, tried and true. Studies have shown what should have been self-evident, that hungry children have difficulty concentrating on math lessons. Pregnant women who don’t get enough to eat deliver malnourished babies. Every now and then we see a truly warm fuzzy story about a homeless 18 year old who gets in to Harvard and does beautifully, and thank heavens there are such stories of the

indomitable human spirit and the grace of God. Far more homeless 18 year olds though end up in court and in prison.

As many of you know, I was a prison chaplain for 17 years. I never spent the night and always had my car keys in my pocket, but it was the most fun I have ever had. Isaiah was sent also to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. Always a crowd-pleasing Biblical verse to the incarcerated. So many in Scripture did time. Even Jesus was on death row briefly. Paul, Jeremiah, Peter, John, all were at one time or another in the joint. So too were relatives of folks here at St. Luke's, and at every other church in which I have talked about these things. And prison alumni have worshipped here. Most get out, most do well, and it is wonderful that our St. Luke's faith team is sponsoring and working with a young man recently out of prison. The heating and air conditioning system in our home is serviced regularly by a wonderful man who years ago was an armed drug dealer. My car is serviced by a fellow who years ago robbed a bank.

In 1999 I was in London during Holy Week. On Palm Sunday we went to the Chapel Royal at St. James' Palace, where the young Queen Victoria and Albert were married, and where Princess Diana lay in state. Pretty uptown, in other words. I brought the palms

home and burned them the night before the next Ash Wednesday, to make the ashes for the service in the Chapel on the Green at the federal prison at Butner. I wrote the dean of the Chapel Royal in London to tell him what use we made of the palm branches I got there. He was delighted and asked me to send him some palm branches from our Palm Sunday service at the prison. So the following Ash Wednesday, the ashes used in the liturgy at the Chapel Royal, St. James' Palace, came from the palm branches at the federal prison in Butner. The dean and I both told our congregations, very different yet very similar, of the meaningful trans-Atlantic exchange.

To comfort and provide for those who mourn. I have long thought the Church is at its best in ministry to the dying and to those left behind. A frequent conversational topic among clergy is weddings vs funerals. I do not know a bishop, priest, or deacon who would not rather, generally speaking and all things considered, do a funeral than a wedding. Now please don't misunderstand me. I purely love doing a wedding for a family member or for someone I really know and care about. I have had the wonderful privilege of doing the weddings of two of my children and a niece, and of any number of dear friends and loved ones, some here at St. Luke's.

What none of us like though is the sense of being rented along with the punch bowl. At a funeral though there is a real tangible need and we never have to wonder “Why am I here?” We are here at such times to comfort and provide for those who mourn, and to bring life and joy to the reality of Easter, regardless of the time of year. I have done funerals for shipmates and classmates, for my grandmother and countless loved ones, and I always feel emotionally exhausted, as I am sure I will at my mother’s, whenever that occurs. And, at weddings of those I know and love, there is a feeling of enormous happiness and joy. The wedding of a couple I scarcely know though leaves me wanting a drink. Have you ever seen the TV show Say Yes to the Dress? I rest my case.

The Lord loves justice, and hates robbery and wrongdoing. Who doesn’t? Justice though must be tempered with mercy, as Christ showed us when he successfully prevented the stoning to death of the adulterous woman. It is mindboggling to think that sort of thing still goes on today, in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We imprison more people than any country on earth in a war on drugs we can never win and which was lost years ago. We should worry about 35 year sentences for 20 year olds, not just for the astonishing expense involved, which you and I pay for, but for

concern about what that 20 year old will be at age 55. We should worry about the murder rate being higher in Texas and Virginia, which lead the country in executions, than in Michigan and Wisconsin, which have never had the death penalty. Something, perhaps justice, is missing. And given the numbers which are hard to argue with, we must hope the Governor vetoes the repeal of the Racial Justice Act, which isn't going to let anyone out of prison. Amos put it best a couple of hundred years before Isaiah:

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness
like an ever-flowing stream.

Paul wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else, with Luke close behind. And his first letter to the Thessalonians, the church at Thessalonica, a seaport in northern Greece, is likely his earliest preserved letter, written about 50 AD. The portion we heard earlier contains pretty good advice on how to prepare for the Christmas that will be upon us in two weeks. And, in truth, to prepare for the rest of our lives:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what

is good; abstain from every form of evil. 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.

Next year in Jerusalem? Maybe, maybe not, but definitely two weeks from now God will be in Bethlehem, waiting to be born.

Amen.

St. Luke's

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