

**The Third Sunday of Advent • December 14, 2008**

*St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA*

*Rev. Braun Campbell*

Isaiah 61:1-11

"Favored"

Our text from Isaiah 61 originally went out to the people of Israel while they were in Babylon, in exile. Hope and joy were as far from their minds as their homeland, hundreds and hundreds of miles away to the west. They could only think back to the good old days of David and Solomon. Israel and Judah had been crushed by their enemies' armies. Jerusalem, known as the "city of David," was lost to them, Solomon's temple destroyed. The people were now captives in a foreign nation, a broken and brokenhearted people who felt that God had deserted them. What promise did the future hold?

I don't know if the people of Israel would have had to have worn anything to indicate that they were, in effect, prisoners of Babylon. In this history of our nation, we've had uniforms for imprisoned people. If you remember old-time movies, or even the recent *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, you could identify inmates by the clothes they had to wear, like those pajama-looking suits with the broad, black-and-white horizontal stripes. Today, jails and prisons in America use brightly colored jumpsuits to clothe convicts: generic, economical outfits that label their wearers as convicts. As "power ties" project an aura of importance and leather jackets, cool, the prison jumpsuit seems to engender resignation and conformity. Hope and joy seem far away.

But do all captives today wear jumpsuits? Taking a look at our own lives, we might come to realize that there are walls that hold us captive. Walls that – though they might be invisible – become prisons. In this season of holidays, you might be feeling certain walls pressing in on you. As family and friends come to visit, the bruises from past hurts might keep coming to mind, keeping you from feeling like you can make a new start. Your relationships probably haven't always been filled with hope and joy, and the shadows of the past have a funny way of sneaking up on you all of a sudden. You might not feel like reconnecting with someone who has left you brokenhearted or disappointed, out of fear that you'll feel pain again. Add to that the pressure of packed holiday schedules, to-do lists that just seem to keep growing while available time is disappearing, budgets which are already stressed having to cover additional holiday expenses – no wonder that hope and joy seem far away! We may begin to wear despair and fatigue like a prison uniform, one which affects us as well as the other people in our lives. Like the exiled people of Israel, we might wonder if God has forgotten us. What promise does the future hold?

Jesus read the opening portion of our text from Isaiah 61 at the synagogue in Nazareth, where he was raised. Explaining the passage he'd just read aloud, Jesus told the people that this Scripture was fulfilled in their hearing – Jesus is God's anointed, the one who would deliver that good news to God's favored people. He is the Servant that we read about in Isaiah who would bring about the binding up of those who are broken. He is the Messiah who would make liberty a reality for those who have long been held captive. This was the hope and the promise that God gave to Israel in Babylon. He had not forgotten them. The Servant would comfort the people in despair. He would trade their "bad" for the good: instead of ashes on their foreheads, they would be crowned with things of beauty. Instead of mourning, they would receive gladness. Instead of wearing faint and weary spirits like prisoners' clothes, God would clothe them with apparel which is fit for a great celebration! Through the Messiah, God would do that for them, and for us. All those whom God has called to be His own are His favored people.

What does it mean to be God's favored people, especially here and now in this third week of Advent? It doesn't mean that things will be any easier for us, or the pressures that seem to pile up

on us will magically disappear. The captivity of the Hebrew people did not end immediately upon the hearing Isaiah's message of the Messiah. It's highly unlikely that they got an extra hour in the day to get everything done, or that they started making more money to pay for Christmas gifts! Instead, God's message would work a change in the hearts and minds of the people. Through the prophet, the Lord pointed the people ahead in hope. **God's favored people have been given a promise of hope for the future.** He reminded the people that He had not forgotten them, declaring that they would one day return to the land from which they had been removed. And so it came to pass: the people of Judah were freed from captivity to rebuild their homeland, but they would still look ahead to the day of the Lord and the Messiah.

As God's favored people in these days, we don't look for the Lord to make everything go our way. We still face challenges and temptations. But God has put the promise of hope in our hearts, a promise which he guaranteed in the blood of His Son on the cross. Through Jesus, the Servant and the Messiah, the promise is fulfilled. We who had been captive to sin and despair are now set free. When faced with the pressures and temptations of this holiday season, we are no longer prisoners who have no choice in how to respond. We need not repeat the past mistakes and selfish choices. We can forgive as we have ourselves been forgiven. **God's favor changes us, giving us an entirely new wardrobe.**

Setting us free from our captivity, God exchanges our prison uniforms with clothes that bring joy just in the wearing! Think about the fanciest clothes you've ever worn. Were you attending a black-tie celebration that required a formal dress or tuxedo? Did you find yourself in a wedding party, or were you going out with friends? You can start to feel special wearing fine clothing, even before going anywhere! But if you're not much of a formal person, I'm guessing that there's a favorite pair of jeans, a sweatshirt, or maybe even a pair of shoes that conveys joy when you put it on – say, when you've come home from a long day and just want to relax. In the closing verses of our text from Isaiah, we read that God keeps us well dressed in the garments of salvation, in the robe of righteousness. As a bride and groom wear clothing of great beauty that bring joy to those who see them, God clothes His favored people in the new life He gives.

What promise does the future hold? As God's people, we know that there is more to the Advent season than the hustle and bustle of the world around us. We know that we can look beyond the difficult times that we may face because we know that God has not forgotten us. Our Lord Jesus Christ will come again. In these weeks before Christmas, we come before our Lord in repentance, making ready for his return among us. And we wait as those to whom God has shown favor, in Advent hope and joy, for the Messiah who came once as a little baby and who will return as king of all.

As Paul instructed those early Christians in our epistle for today from 1 Thessalonians 5, *“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 prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.”* Such Advent living is the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in us. He is the one who dresses us each day in the robes of hope and joy that our Father in heaven provides, just as earth nurtures the flowers that spring up and clothe the meadows in the spring.

Should you start to feel walls closing in on you in the coming weeks, and should you be tempted to despair, remember: our Advent Lord is with you. Take hope and rejoice, for instead of being forgotten, you are favored.

Amen.