



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
 Asheville, North Carolina
 13 December 2020
 Sermon: What are YOU waiting for?
 Rev. Dr. Richard Coble

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11
 Luke 1:46-55

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11 (NRSV)

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;
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God;
 to comfort all who mourn;
 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.
 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.

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.
 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.

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.
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.

Luke 1:46-55 (NRSV)

And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

There are certain days in your life that you know will forever be etched in your memory, because they are days you stand on a precipice between two worlds: your graduations, your wedding day or the day of your divorce, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one. March 12, 2020 - the day after the NBA announced suspension of its season, and the Trump administration halts travel to Europe, and the World Health Organization declares the coronavirus outbreak to be a pandemic. That day the full staff at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church met in the fellowship hall for a meeting unlike any we have had before. We sat in two 8-foot-long tables, laid out in a V shape, pointed towards the white board, where Marcia lead our discussion and recorded notes about next steps. Right now, I can see us sitting along those tables like I just left that meeting. It was my first time wondering how close we should all be sitting next to one another. Should we use the same pen when we passed along a sign-up sheet? Cliff, our maintenance and repair technician, had poured some water in pitchers for the meeting, and I saw no one touched them. There was nervous laughter when someone pointed this out. Of course, it was safe to pour from a common pitcher, but was it? No one knew.

The meeting was a precipice. I walked into it living my life in one way, a pre-pandemic way, and as I walked out, I walked into the age of the coronavirus, into empty grocery shelves, furloughed workers, concern for church members and loved ones, live-streamed worship. The magnitude of that meeting dawned on me

gradually. You'll remember that week, the state of North Carolina was saying everything was shutting down for 2 weeks, but we knew, and we said aloud, it was going to be longer. On the white board, Marcia wrote in columns, with headers like "online worship"; "zoom meetings"; "working with session and deacons"; "next steps." It took some time, maybe halfway through the meeting, I realized we were going to be working from home for a while, that my house was going to become my office. Then, I realized my son was not going to be in school for a while. So, I was going to be home, working, with a four-year-old, also at home. Then the next question: what about my spouse, a healthcare worker, who was then in her third trimester of pregnancy? What did this mean for her? For our family? These thoughts and questions took some time for me to formulate; they took even longer to sink in. I walked into the meeting in one reality, and walked out in another.

Right now, I suspect many of you are thinking back to that week in the middle of March. I bet many of you also have vivid memories of conversations like this at your place of work, at your dinner table, on the phone with loved ones. Where were you when the world shut down? That week is so vivid in our memory because it was a liminal space, an in-between time, the already but not quite yet of our present pandemic reality. It was a time that required faith. No one was sure what was coming, but we had to choose. Would we trust God to hold our faith

community together in distance? Would we trust God to lead us into the coming year?

The Isaiah of Ch. 61 faced a similar question, in a similar uncertain, liminal time. Babylon had conquered Israel in the early years of the 6th century BCE, taking the people into exile in a foreign land. But after fifty years, the Persian King Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon, and gave permission to the Israelite exiles, finally, to come home. Isaiah 61 stands on the precipice between two worlds, the half century of exile, and the promise of deliverance. And into this liminal space, Isaiah proclaims God at work: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; God 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.” Isaiah proclaims the “year of the Lord’s favor.” This is a reference to the Jubilee year outlined in the book of Deuteronomy. In ancient Israel, according to the Pentateuch, every seven years ancestral land was to be returned to its original family, all debts were erased and those forced to labor to pay off their debts were released. By Isaiah’s day, it had been a long time since a Jubilee year, if there ever in fact had been one,¹ but, now he says, this is the “year of the Lord’s favor.” Isaiah does not just proclaim, then, the release of his community but the

¹ There’s evidence in the Prophets that Israel never actually practiced the Jubilee year.

release of all captives, all oppressed, the cancelation of all debts, for the Lord loves justice; the Lord comforts those who mourn.

The passage is striking in its hope and its trust. At the time of Isaiah, Israel laid still in ruins. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah record that in the years that followed, the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the temple were arduous, full of conflict and uncertainty. Isaiah could have chosen despair, or apathy, or judgment, but instead, he looked out into a world of desolation, at a conquered and oppressed people far from a home ransacked by empire and slave drivers, and proclaimed the year of the Lord, jubilee, release, grace, justice. Not because these were yet a reality, but because he saw God breaking into the world of brokenness that laid before him. Not yet, but already. Isaiah proclaimed the already of God's justice into the not yet of his day, the last days of exile.

Half a millennium later another prophet by the name of Mary sang a song, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowliness of God's servant... The Lord has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Like Isaiah, Mary proclaimed God's justice in a time of oppression. Remember in that in the half millennium between Isaiah and Mary, Rome had conquered Israel, subjected it to the military rule of its prefects,

employed torture and public execution as a means of domination, and taxed the people mercilessly. And yet, Mary had a vision that her willingness to say yes to God, to work and labor with God in the most embodied of ways, would usher in salvation, would illuminate God's favor for the oppressed and marginalized, would change this world in ways no one could have expected. Into the not yet of empire, oligarchy, and oppression Mary proclaimed the already of the justice of God, the grace of God, the promise of God. "My soul magnifies the Lord," said Mary.

I wonder in this Advent season of waiting and expectation, what are you waiting for? These winter days bring COVID case numbers and deaths counts like we have never seen; the FDA late Friday night approved the Pfizer vaccine for emergency use; the current administration is losing its last cases against the November election in the Supreme Court; Grace Covenant celebrates its first Advent season socially distanced and online. Where are you in this in-between time? What are you expecting? Where do you see God breaking in?

This Advent season we have asked this community: What are you waiting for? You've sent in pictures, and these have played each week during the prayer of illumination. We've received signs of great expectation:

[Pictures 1 & 2] We've seen pictures of vaccine shots going into arms.

[Pictures 3 & 4] We've seen Advent boxes and creche sets.

[Pictures 5 & 6] Pictures of longing for the church building. Those pictures touch a deep place of longing within me as well.

And the striking thing, that we see over and over, are pictures of community coming together.

[Pictures 7 & 8 & 9] Sisters at the sea

[Picture 10] Youth leading “A story like no other”

[Picture 11, 12, 13, 14 & 15] Fellowship dinners, and worship services, and families and friends close together.

Looking at these pictures, I am struck, that this too is the already, in the not yet. This too, is the love of God made flesh and walking among us. These pictures are not sitting forgotten on someone’s shelf or unopened on a hard drive. You have offered them up to this community so that, across distances and times, we would come together to see and celebrate them, celebrate the love and the faith that binds us together, in person and across computer screens. These pictures and the love and longing behind them bring us together in Spirit as we are apart. This is a community formed and reformed, by the grace of God and the love of people for one another, in the bleakest of winter, in the most distanced time of our pandemic year. Grace Covenant, see the love of God breaking in right here, right now, through you, through your reaching out and breaking in.

Isaiah and Mary were prophets because they proclaimed the justice of God in the midst of empire and oppression. Instead of despair, they trusted in God's already in the not yet of their days. As a community of faith, may we do the same.

- Like a church staff, trusting that God would keep our community together in the opening days of the pandemic.
- Like a church community that has dedicated to meeting every week live over the internet, even when it risks connections not working, or microphones left muted, or any number of uncertainties in live-streamed worship; we choose to be together in this moment, a community gathered in distance.
- Like a stewardship season, when people commit their time and resources to the coming year that we cannot yet fathom.
- Like 146 participants and counting in a white dominant community engaging in the Me and White Supremacy initiative, taking a hard look at their own complicity, benefit, and furtherance of the racism that plagues this town and country.
- Like the Creating Sanctuary Team joining an interfaith protest against Immigrant Detention Centers and the Power and Race Team's ongoing pursuit to rid our systems of White Supremacy cultural characteristics.
- Like countless deacons, deacon helpers, and congregants who have brought meals, and sent cards, and called upon the sick, and the mourning, and the

lonely of this church, knowing that so many are hurting, knowing we all are struggling these days.

- Like you, tuning into this service, to hear word of God's love, God's justice, and through it, to find joy, just as Isaiah and Mary did so long ago.

In such ways, we have proclaimed and participated in God's already in the not yet of this time. What are you waiting for? What we do, Grace Covenant, in the waiting, matters. In the hard days of the not yet of this winter, let us continue to seek the inbreaking of God's already. Because the Spirit that spoke through Isaiah and Mary is here still, and She speaks to us, visions and invitations to justice and joy. Thanks be to God.