

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11; John 1:22-27

Message: He Will Guide You

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Advent 2

Pastor Jack Van de Hoef

It has been said to me, and about me, that I am an idealist. I see the positive side of things, almost to an extreme. Or I've been called an eternal optimist. Now, I have taken that as a compliment, but I have also learned that I need to balance my idealism or optimism with some realism sometimes.

For example, when reading Isaiah 61, it's easy to focus on certain words. It's easy to see this as a passage of promise and hope. After all, we read:

good news	comfort
bind up	crown of beauty
freedom	garment of praise
release from darkness	

Great things are promised! Great things are taking place. Look at the positive things that we can expect from God!

However, to focus only on those words does not do justice to the context of this passage. We also read:

poor	mourn, grieve
brokenhearted	ashes
captives	spirit of despair
darkness, prisoners	

The people who heard these words were either in exile or had just returned from exile. They had experienced the pain of being uprooted from their homes and being forced to live in a foreign land. They had experienced the pain of punishment for their disobedience toward God. They were poor. They were captives. They grieved. There was a sense of despair and being broken.

In our devotions at our Council meeting this past Tuesday, we were reminded that sometimes we will spiritualize verses like these. As if it's all about being poor in spirit and broken of heart because of sin. As if the despair is only about our relationship with God.

But we were also reminded that we cannot deny the very real experience of these words. It's so true in the lives of people we know, or in our own lives.

For example, did you notice that the days are getting shorter? And shorter. For another

12 more days. Right now, we experience more darkness per day, than we do light. Less than 9 hours of daylight per day. Next week Friday, it will be less than 8 3/4 hours of daylight, before the amount of daylight begins to increase. That leads some people to despair. It's not a spiritual darkness of sin, but a practical darkness of depression. And it's very real.

There are people around us, and sitting here this morning, that are pressured by all the hype of getting the right and best Christmas presents, but they can't really afford it. So they borrow. They go to the Money Mart down the street and borrow some money at 44.9% interest. Or they put it on their credit card and pay 20% or 23 % interest. They buy gifts, going in debt to do so, and pay more money for those gifts just because of the interest.

They are poor. These are not people who are poor in spirit, or poor in their relationship with God. They are financially poor. They are the poor on social welfare. They are the working poor, who have a job and work for a wage that is hardly enough to live on. They hear reports of groceries getting more expensive and wonder how they will afford it.

In the Advent email devotional from the Office of Social Justice, the author wrote this past week about the community she walks with at the Edmonton Native Healing Centre. They are a community of people who are waiting:

- waiting in line at night to get a spot in one of the local shelters.
- waiting in line for a warm meal at a community kitchen.
- waiting for an opening for treatment to address their addictions.
- waiting for a social worker to get back to them on a request for help.

This is not a spiritual waiting for Jesus to come, but a practical waiting for basic needs and help.

We could talk about those who are captive to guilt for something they have done and have never forgiven themselves. Or it is being captive to disappointment with oneself or someone else, just not meeting expectations, whether they were realistic or not.

These verses could be speaking of those who are in prison, for crimes they have committed. Or in prison, waiting for a trial where they can plead and argue their innocence, but the court backlog means they continue to sit in prison, for days, months, waiting.

Or these verses speak of the prison that anger has built. Someone has so hurt us that we can't stop thinking about it. We grieve the injustice that wells up to anger.

We could read these verses to be speaking of sitting in the darkness of an addiction or a bad relationship.

That's reality. That's the world we live in. It's a hurting world, filled with fear. There is

lashing out from that hurt and fear. There is suspicion. There is judgment and hatred and despair and grieving. It's real.

Into that dark world, we speak about , and shine, the light of Jesus. Without denying the darkness, we talk about and live the light. This is not a blind optimism. This is a confident declaration that there is more than despair, more than grief, more than poverty, more than brokenness and ashes.

good news is spoken to the poor  
bind up the brokenhearted  
freedom is for captives  
release from darkness and for prisoners

comfort is for those who mourn, grieve  
crown of beauty replaces ashes  
garment of praise replaces a spirit of despair

There is good news. The God who speaks the words of Isaiah 61 has set us free from guilt. He overcomes the darkness of the grave and gives hope in our grief. He removes the sin and guilt and we can put on the new garment of praise. He inspires generous hearts to share with the poor, to walk alongside the broken, to work for justice.

We can replace our anger with joyful songs and dancing. The light of Jesus shines in the darkness and removes the chains.

And so we read of

mighty oaks  
a planting of the LORD  
garments of salvation  
robe of his righteousness

bridegroom adorns his head  
bride adorns with jewels  
sprout comes up / seeds grow

There is a new way of doing things as we prepare the way of the Lord. There are new opportunities and new directions beyond the darkness and pain.

This is the promise, the longing of Advent. This message reaches into our imaginations, because we don't see the world exactly like this yet. It seems such a long way off. We have confidence in the God who makes the promise. It keeps our hopes alive, even as we wait and long for a better time. In our pain and poverty and darkness, we can be sure that the present reality is not the last word.

The light shining in the darkness is from a faithful God, who loved us so much he sent his Son. The light shining in the darkness is from a faithful God who came in the first Advent and won the victory over sin and darkness. The light shining in the darkness is from a faithful God who promises a second Advent, a coming again in victory once and for all.

So what do we do in this in-between place, in this "already, but not yet"? Do we live with

blind optimism and radical idealism: “Don’t worry. Be happy. It’ll get better.”

Do we live in denial? “It’s not really that bad. Look on the bright side. Put a smile on your face.”

Or do we name the pain. Name the darkness. Name the despair for what it is. Even as we look to the God of peace who promises to bring us along another way. Name the light and life and victory of the coming of Jesus. We find a way to live out that hope and peace, even if it hasn't arrived. Little by little, we find and share and practice restoration and resurrection in our daily lives. We work for communities of shalom. We pray and work for the peace of the city and for our enemies. We become a light to enlighten the nations. We scream “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!” from under the weight of a broken world.

As Bruce Cockburn puts it, “we’ve got to keep kicking at the darkness so that the light can break through.”

What do we hear in these words from Isaiah? Do we hear words of good news and gladness? But it’s not the kind of joy that’s tied to happiness, bright lights around us or gifts under our trees. It’s not even tied to happy economic, political or sports news. This good news of peace is, instead, linked to God’s presence and promise to free us from our pain, our darkness, our grief.

And those whom God has set free in Christ look for where we can help rebuild what has been ruined, for where we can help free those who are enslaved. Those who know and believe the light of Jesus look to minister to those sitting in some kind of physical, emotional or spiritual darkness. After all, Christ’s disciples go where Christ leads us.

It doesn’t the darkness is gone. Nor is it simply saying “Get over it.” It means sitting with someone, listening, sharing the light of Christ by being present. Walk with those in darkness to be the light of Christ to them. Work for justice to bring light to the broken.

It’s not that the ashes, mourning, and faint spirit aren’t real. They are. They are as real as Jesus grave. But like the grave, they’re also temporary. You may lie battered in a grave of bad news for three days, or for a stretch of miserable months, or even for many sorrowful years. But Sunday is always coming, and God will exchange your death for resurrection.

He will guide you. Into a way and a place of life, of peace, a new way and a deeper peace. He will guide you into a new relationship with God and with each other. There is peace and light in the darkness. Let the light of Jesus shine in your life, and through you into the world.

Amen.