12/19-20/20 Good News for Everyone Rev. Amy Haines

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 In the Waiting Advent Series

Good news! The media proclaimed.

On the day Japan surrendered, marking an end to World War 2.

On the day John Glenn returned safely from earth’s orbit.

On the day this past week when the first COVID-19 vaccines began to be distributed.

I rejoiced yesterday when I saw a picture on Facebook of JR Pickett receiving his vaccine shot.

JR is the son of Jackie and Stan Pickett from our church, and the deputy medical director for the city of Austin, Texas.

Good news! The media proclaimed.

When families divided for decades reunited on top of the Berlin Wall.

When Nelson Mandela became president of the very nation who had imprisoned him.

When an October snowstorm brought relief to Colorado wildfires.

Yet how many more examples of good news don’t get shared through our phones each day?

How many more examples of good news are all around us?

Babies are born.

Cancers go into remission.

Neighbors help neighbors.

Forgiveness is given and received.

Local food pantries are supported.

Homeless families are cared for at Christmas.

Strangers stand up for one another in the face of harassment.

Loved ones come to know the love of Jesus.

Good news! That is the word of the prophet Isaiah today. Good news for a weary world, good news for a struggling people, good news for lasting peace. What is this good news? The good news of God with us.

Today, we are coming to the end of the season of Advent, a time of active waiting, preparing our hearts and lives to welcome the coming of Christ at Christmas.

Christmas is about more than presents and family and singing Silent Night. Christmas is about receiving the good news of God with us, a gift given not only at Christmas, but throughout the year!

Are we ready to receive such a gift? Are we ready to receive such good news?

For this is not good news we celebrate one day and forget about the next. This is good news for our lives here and now and for all eternity. This is good news that will change our lives forever.

In today’s Scripture passage, the prophet Isaiah is speaking good news to the faithful remnant of God’s people who have returned to Jerusalem from exile. The reality of their return was not what they had dreamed of.

They found a city and temple in ruins. They found the community who had remained in political turmoil and economic instability. They realized that rebuilding would take generations.

Compare their struggles to the many communities in our country who have struggled to rebuild after fire or flood or violence. Vacant blocks are still evidence of the devastation in New Orleans

from Hurricane Katrina. California towns devastated by wildfire are struggling to even get the correct permits to rebuild basic infrastructure so that homeowners can realistically return. Communities racked by violent protests this past summer have not seen some of their businesses return.

To a people struggling in Jerusalem, Isaiah spoke words of vision, words of hope for a future,

words of comfort and joy that God was still with them, God was still seeking to be in covenant with them, and God was still yearning to rebuild and transform them into the people of God they were meant to be.

God declared,

In my faithfulness I will reward my people  
    and make an everlasting covenant with them.

Their descendants will be known among the nations  
    and their offspring among the peoples.  
All who see them will acknowledge  
    that they are a people the Lord has blessed. (61:8b-9 NIV)

To a people who felt forgotten, God reminded them they were still loved.

To a people yearning for a future, God offered an everlasting relationship.

The prophet Isaiah also proclaimed,

The spirit of the Lord has anointed me…

to bring good news to the poor,  
    to bind up the brokenhearted,  
    to proclaim release for captives,  
        and liberation for prisoners,

    to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor  
        and a day of vindication for our God,  
    and to comfort all who mourn. (61:1-2 CEB)

This is good news not just for the rich or the powerful; this is good news for all people!

All who mourn--all who are broken--all who are struggling--God is with them. God is with us.

We don’t have to have our lives all put together to be in relationship with God. We don’t have to live by a certain standard to claim our place among the people of God. We don’t have to ignore our pain and struggle to be loved by God. God loves all of us, even in our sin. God offers us salvation not because we have earned it, but as a gift of grace.

God invites us to live into his peace—not the peace that is the absence of conflict, but the peace that is the presence of God with us that centers us even amid the storms of life.

This is the good news we hear and proclaim today—God loves us, God redeems us, and God seeks to be with us always. This is good news for everyone, regardless of status or gender or age or economic level. This is good for the poor and the poor in spirit. This is good for the broken and the healed. This is good for the captive and those freed from darkness.

God loves us. God redeems us. God is with us always.

When we embrace this good news, we are also called to see how this good news is not only for us, but also for the world around us. The people of Israel were not simply God’s people; they were called to be a light to the nations. As followers of Jesus, we are also called to point the way to Christ.

In Luke chapter 4 Jesus began his ministry by quoting today’s passage from Isaiah and declaring that the vision would be fulfilled through him. As we follow Jesus, his ministry becomes our ministry. His hope becomes our hope. His vision becomes our vision. His ways become our ways.

Advent is not only a season of active waiting, but it is also a season of preparing to respond to the good news of Jesus, God with us. We respond through our faith in Jesus, but we also respond through our faithfulness to Jesus’ ways.

We point the way to Christ when we become messengers of God’s hope and love and peace and joy. We become messengers not only in what we say, but also in how we live.

If we take this morning’s Scripture seriously, the work of bringing the good news to the oppressed falls on all of us who claim the name of Christ. This is not the work of a specific political party or certain non-profit organizations. This is the work of God’s anointed ones, God’s beloved children called and chosen to do God’s work in this world.

We are the ones called to bind up the brokenhearted and proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners, we are the ones to proclaim the year of justice, the year of God’s favor

and the forgiveness of debt, we are the ones to comfort those who mourn, changing their weeping into shouts of joy.

Shirlie Guthrie reminds us that Christians bear witness to the presence of God in the world

(first of all) in the following ways:

By the way they drive their cars on expressways, treat checkout clerks at the grocery store,

pay attention to those who serve them by collecting their garbage or taking their order at restaurants.

By the political programs and economic policies they support or refuse to support –especially when their stand threatens the self-interest of the particular political, racial or economic group

to which they themselves belong.

By the way they keep hoping and working for change in people and institutions when others say that nothing can be done.

By the way they are saddened or outraged by events that cause some others to rejoice, and rejoice when some others are bitterly disappointed.

By the way they remain calm when others panic and are deeply disturbed when others are complacent.

By their indifference to whether they or the church gets the credit when the cause of justice, freedom and peace is advanced, being just as glad when it happens as the result of others' efforts as when it happens as the result of their own efforts.

-Shirley C. Guthrie Jr., Diversity in Faith Unity in Christ (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 88. Homiletics 12-15-02

Katherine Willis Pershey reminds us that

.. The same spirit of God that came upon Isaiah and later overshadowed Mary still moves among us today. The light is bright now, though we are still living in the darkness. Now we pray fervently for wars to cease and captives to be liberated; now we petition anxiously for beloved ones to survive another round of chemotherapy and another barrage of tests. And even now we rejoice, for through the lens of God’s good news, everything looks very different. Let us join our souls with Mary’s to magnify the Lord. Let us capture the Spirit of justice and hope as proclaimed by the prophet Isaiah. Stand and sing, friends. The Son of God is on the way!

The light of Christ is in our world!

--Katherine E. Willis Pershey kewp.blogspot.com 12.8.05[edited]

God’s news is good news for everyone, everyone willing to listen, receive and respond!

God’s love is for all humanity, God’s offer of salvation is for all who will believe, God Spirit seeks to still work in and through and among us.

This is good news that we celebrate at Christmas and throughout the year!

But this is also good news that calls us to more.

I was moved this week by a poem called “The Work of Christmas Begins” by Michael Dougherty,

a variation of Howard Thurman’s “When the Song of the Angels is Stilled.”

When the carols have been stilled,  
When the star-topped tree is taken down,  
When family and friends are gone home,  
When we are back to our schedules  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To welcome the refugee,  
To heal a broken planet,  
To feed the hungry,  
To build bridges of trust, not walls of fear,  
To share our gifts,  
To seek justice and peace for all people,  
To bring Christ’s light to the world.

The good news of Christmas is not just for one night, but for every day. God loves us, God redeems us, and God seeks to be with us always.

May we listen to and receive such good news, then may we share such good news through our faithful witness, acting in hope, living by peace, sharing love and justice person by person, day by day, step by step.

May it be so. Amen.