

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: God's Boundless Grace

Lesson: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

61 *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.*

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,

² *to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,*

³ *and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.*

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

⁴ *They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.*

⁸ *"For I, the Lord, love justice;*

I hate robbery and wrongdoing.

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

⁹ *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."*

¹⁰ *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

¹¹ *For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.*

Today, we read Isaiah 61, where God gives comforting words and hope to those worried about the uncertain future.

The Israelites used to be slaves in Egypt, working nonstop without rights or respect. In their tough times, all they could do was ask God for help. God heard them and sent Moses.

Following Moses' lead with God's guidance, they crossed the Red Sea and entered the wilderness. Even after gaining freedom from Egypt, their lives stayed uncertain. The wilderness had no clear paths, no food or water, and was full of dangers like wild animals. Day and night brought different challenges—daytime,

they couldn't figure out where to go, and at night, it got freezing. They entered the wilderness hoping for freedom with Moses, but reality turned out to be tough.

The Israelites, whenever faced with difficulties, often blamed God and Moses. But, surprisingly, God took care of all their needs with incredible love and mercy. When they were hungry, He gave them special bread called manna, and when they were thirsty, He provided water. During the day, a pillar of cloud kept them safe and showed them the way, and at night, a pillar of fire kept them warm and secure.

So, with Moses, they wandered around in the wilderness. Even though life seemed kind of okay, they messed up big time. While Moses was up on a mountain getting God's rules, they got anxious and unsure. Without Moses around, they felt lost. To fix things, they went to Aaron, Moses' brother, and asked for help. Aaron's not-so-great solution to their troubles? Making a Golden Calf to worship.

The Israelites, in front of Aaron, brought all their gold, melted it, and started making an idol to worship. When Moses returned, he rebuked them. And Moses repented before God. Because of Moses' sincere repentance, God gave them another chance.

But, the Israelites didn't really change. When things got tough, they kept blaming God and Moses, and they missed the time when they lived in Egypt. The big problem was that even Moses started to change. At first, he depended on God to take care of his people, but later on, he mistakenly thought he could do it all by himself.

Due to a single mistake, God told Moses that he would not be able to enter the land of Canaan. Before they got there, Moses died, and Joshua took over as the new leader.

Although the Israelites seemed unchanged, their faith grew and matured during their 40 years in the wilderness. When they entered the wilderness, only Moses believed in God, but when they crossed the Jordan River into Canaan, 12 priests, including Joshua, carried the Ark of the Covenant, leading the Israelites.

Finally, after concluding their 40 years journey in the wilderness, they entered the longed-for land of Canaan. And then, they established their nation, and it flourished with great kings like David. However, as time passed, they drifted away from God and did not follow His will. They even worshipped idols.

The Israelites established their nation through many journeys, but it became divided, first into northern and southern kingdoms, and later completely destroyed by Babylon. They were taken captive by Babylon and had a tough life, kind of like when they were slaves in Egypt. When things got hard, they turned back to God and started repenting. This lasted for about 70 years.

God heard their prayers and cries, responding by sending the prophet Isaiah to comfort them with the message: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Isaiah 40:1). Through God's comfort and mercy, they were released from Babylon and returned to Jerusalem. However, their nation was already destroyed, and their temple lay in ruins.

Even when they returned to Jerusalem, their lives didn't get any better. Looking at their homeland in ruins, they felt anxiety about an uncertain future amid sorrow. In response, the prophet Isaiah once again delivers a message of comfort and hope to them.

(Slide 1) "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners," (60:1)

Continuing, he said: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn," (60:2)

Here, "the year of the Lord's favor" refers to the coming of Jesus Christ in the future.

One interesting thing is that Jesus Himself read this prophecy of Isaiah in a synagogue, as mentioned in the Gospel of Luke.

(Slide 2) ¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

(Slide 3) He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down...

What we should pay attention to is that while Isaiah mentioned both "the year of the Lord's favor" and "the day of vengeance of our God," Jesus deliberately did not mention "the day of vengeance of our God." What do you think the reason for this is?

The answer is in John 3:14-17.

(Slide 4) "¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

In accordance with Isaiah's proclamation, Jesus Christ came to this land as "the year of the Lord's favor." However, Jesus coming to us was not to condemn but to save. Therefore, when He was on this earth, He did not read the part about "the day of vengeance of our God" from the Scriptures.

However, Jesus was crucified and lifted up. As He ascended to heaven, He promised to send the Holy Spirit and assured us that He would come back to us again.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. We're waiting for the Lord to come again. When He returns, we'll be perfectly united with God. On that day, there will be no poverty, the brokenhearted will be healed, the oppressed will be set free, and the Lord's comfort and peace will be with those who feel left out.

So, let's pay attention to John the Baptist's call in the wilderness, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

We're all like bridesmaids waiting for the bridegroom. As bridesmaids waiting and preparing for complete union with the bridegroom, I pray that all of us spend this special Advent season meaningfully. Amen.