

“Little Christs” (9Dec18) Isaiah 61

Isaiah sounds like he could be on a political campaign, a candidate declaring, “I’m gonna build up your ancient ruins and raise up the former devastations. I’ll repair ruined cities.” A big list of infrastructure projects, plus making things fair. We’re familiar with such campaigning and sloganeering, so we’d expect the one who claims to be the right choice won’t come through on it all.

In fact, that’s actually somewhat in the background of this Bible reading. This is 3rd Isaiah, because this long book is actually from three distinct time periods. One was before exile. Another was looking forward to coming home. And this final part is after the return.

It came with lackluster realizations that everything wasn’t instantly hunky-dory, like those returnees waking up Christmas morning and realizing they didn’t get everything on their Christmas list. Or maybe Hanukkah list, since they were Jewish, though Hanukkah wouldn’t come about for another couple hundred years. So we’ll just say their wishlist. They had big dreams of what it would be like to be back, home sweet home, visions it would be just right in their own place. Well, they found there’s still work to do, still renovation and remodeling and reconstruction. Their home remained a fixer upper.

But so that they weren’t too disenchanting, 3rd Isaiah again set their sights high.

Still, aside from a small dose of historical inquisitiveness, you are likely not all that concerned at how long the detours and orange cones had clogged the thoroughfares of ancient Jerusalem, much less the blueprints and budgetary implications and red tape of archaic political process. So we’ll bypass describing what this possibly implied for former ruins.

One interesting pause midpoint in history, though, is that this passage gave title to Adam Smith’s book *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, which practically created the modern field of economics and prompted the rise of capitalist

structures. The book introduced the supposed “invisible hand” of the free marketplace. Some may, in this passage, want to equate that invisible hand’s push with the Holy Spirit, making the freedom from captivity into freedom to gain wealth. The improvement in the reading would become development of profitable businesses, expanding neighborhoods and plowing up land and taking advantage.

But I’m not so interested in that narrowly defined economic vision as we encounter this message, nor even transposing in where current devastations are or our failures of expected greatness.

I’m grabbed most by the first phrase: “The Spirit of the LORD God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me and has sent me...”

I propose that this phrase isn’t only applicable to 3rd Isaiah, not just of some old-timey prophet who could claim to be the receptacle of the Spirit. It’s more.

My reasoning is in part from Jesus. We’ll hear some of these same words again next month. In his first sermon and first public appearance in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is in the synagogue for weekly worship and opens a scroll to read “The Spirit of the LORD God is upon, because the Lord has anointed me and has sent me” and so on. Jesus then rolls up the scroll and declares to the congregation, “Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus knew that these weren’t outdated dead words, but still living and moving and claiming. That Spirit was still doing what it wanted to accomplish.

It’s plenty easy today to hear Isaiah’s words applying to Jesus, dropped here in this season of Advent. We know Christmas is coming, and we’ll hear words for Mary that the child conceived in her is “from the Holy Spirit.” Certainly we look to Jesus as the clearest image of God, embodying God’s presence, showing the precise pattern of God’s work.

But this passage means more. Even expecting that the Holy Spirit rested on Jesus and dwelt in him, we heard from the prophet Joel last week of the Spirit poured out on all flesh, on men and

women and old and young and slaves and priests, and all children shall be dreamers. That reading also will come back to us, but not until Pentecost, after Jesus' death and resurrection, when that outpouring spreading Spirit cuts loose and begins really racing around.

Still, that's a little easy. Our Lutheran heritage very valuably recognizes an important difference in how pronouns are used. So last week said the Spirit is poured out on everyone. That might communicate "on them," as others. Or on us, plural. I want you to hear the singular: the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, yes you the individual. And you can speak Isaiah's words, "The Spirit is upon ME!" Why don't you try it: The Spirit is upon ME!

Now you've got some skin in the game. Or, for a big action movie tagline we could say: this time it's personal. This isn't about God broadly and generically working in the world. Sure, that's good news. Joel's words are valuable, that the outpouring of the Spirit isn't restricted by gender or skin color or by age or anything we would categorically label as ability. We emphasize at Pentecost that Spirit is spreading to all nations, that it doesn't in the end recognize the confines of locale or even of religion.

But you're no bystander to this. Because you have the chance to say it again: The Spirit is upon ME!

Now, you may either tremble with trepidation or excitement at these prospects of being put to work. You might ponder your political ambitions, ready to repair ruined cities. You might examine your economic endeavors and inclinations to be moved by the free hand. You might have pious proclivities in thinking that Jesus is an important example for you to try emulating. I don't quite want to quash those quests.

I'm not saying your work isn't important or called for. What I'm saying is that your work isn't *your* work. When you say The Spirit is upon ME!, that isn't a vitamin supplement, a Popeye can of spinach, a dose of encouragement or motivating factor. The Spirit doesn't show up as a little boost for what you already wanted to do.

No, the Spirit claims you for what the Spirit wants to do. And the Spirit does big things, producing the fruits of God's work in the world. The Spirit is upon you and sends you to bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives and release to prisoners; to proclaim Jubilee, to comfort all who mourn and rejuvenate faint spirits. That's certainly more than your task list for the week. It's more to accomplish than a single political term. It may well be the work of a lifetime or across generations.

It's similar to Mary's list in the Magnificat, but notice without reversals, only of gain. There is no casting down or afflicting the comfortable. There is no proclaiming captivity to the liberated or bad news to the oppressors. This is straight all good news. Some may be downer and outer, but we're all in need of God's goodness, in need of new life, in need of restoration, longing for gladness and life rising up from the ashes.

So, again, this is a long view. This is God as a gardener, slowly tending and cultivating the soils, waiting for compost, collecting seeds and carrying on with the crop the next year. This is God as landscape restorationist: that you will be called a mighty oak means you take a while to grow. Even more than that, as a seminary classmate of mine and now religion professor points out, this is a new creation narrative, the Spirit that hovered over the waters in Genesis now arriving for you, as you again repeat The Spirit of the Lord is upon ME!.* So this looks forward in enormous ways to how God's kingdom comes on earth.

But it also looks back to your baptism when, with other words from Isaiah, you were given the gift the Holy Spirit: "the spirit of the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord," the spirit of joy in God's presence, both now and forever (Isaiah 11:2). Your baptism marked another part of this passage. As you proclaim The Spirit of the Lord is upon ME!, the next line continues, "the Lord has anointed ME."

* https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2255

That word “anointed” in Hebrew is Messiah. In Greek, it’s Christ. It’s not pushing you to measure up to Jesus as Christ, as Messiah, as God’s Anointed One. This isn’t about that comparative sense. This is saying that you have been marked with the cross of Christ and sealed by the Holy Spirit forever, an oily emblem on your brow that signifies you are chosen by God, you are sent doing this spiritual work, you are a Little Messiah, a Little Christ, as you are able to declare the Spirit of the Lord is upon ME!