

Oaks of Righteousness

Psalm 126

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Each week pastors who follow the lectionary cycle are faced with choices. Each week the lectionary offers several Scripture verses that the pastor can pick from for their sermon topic. Some weeks I find it easier to choose, as certain Scripture verses speak more loudly to me than others. This week, however, is one of those weeks when I truly struggled to choose which verses to share with you today. In addition to the verses I have chosen, Mary's soliloquy known as the Magnificat was one of the other choices. Why would I choose the Isaiah reading over the Magnificat?

Mary in her song of praise recognizes all that God has done for his people and will continue to do through her Son. That is as it should be. Mary was living in a time of great darkness in the world. While the time period may be known as the Pax Romana, Roman peace, it is understood that the peace spoken of was maintained by crushing violence. God's people were awaiting the light that would be the Messiah.

The words of Isaiah also give praise to God, and again as it should be. God's people were coming to the end of their 70 year exile in Babylon. A dark time in the history of Israel. The people awaited the light of freedom from their captors. The words of Isaiah go just a little bit further than those of Mary, though, by inviting God's people to join in His restorative work.

Isaiah declares good news to the oppressed, calls for binding up the hearts of those who are brokenhearted, and proclaims liberty to captives and prisoners, which is what God's people had become in 70 years of captivity in Babylon. The year of the Lord's favor had arrived, the people would no longer mourn for Israel. Joy would be restored, and the people would be called Oaks of Righteousness, the garden of the Lord displaying His glory.

Here is where I got stuck in the Scripture – why oaks? There are 22 different kinds of trees mentioned in the Bible. Trees are mentioned more than any other living thing, other than humans, in the Bible. So why oak trees?

Through a little research I gleaned this information. There are 200 species of oak trees. Though the oak is one family, there are many varieties. Just as humans are one family, we come in many different varieties. Oak trees flourish in a variety of habitats, from swamps to the dry ground of higher elevations. Humans live in a variety of habitats, from the Amazon jungles of South America, to the deserts of Asia and Africa, to the frozen North of the Yukon. Oak trees are strong and versatile in their uses. In early days oak trees were used in shipbuilding and barrel-making. Today oak is used for making furniture, flooring, and railroad ties. Humans have a variety of skills and giftings that can be used in many different ways. Oaks are also used for maintaining the environment. Because of their extensive root systems, they don't easily topple and so are used for soil conservation in hillside projects and as costal windbreaks. We are to develop strong root

systems by trusting God to hold us through the storms of life. Oaks also provide food and habitat for God's creatures. The fruit of the oak, acorns, is a food source for many different types of animals. Deer will even eat the twigs of the oak tree. Birds and other animals make their homes in the branches of the oak. The oak offers comfort and safety to the animals that rely on it for food and shelter. Oaks are also long-lived, lasting as many as 150 years or more.

Now I could see why Isaiah references "oaks of righteousness". God's people, made up of different genders, colors, places of origin, and personalities, are all called to live in His righteousness. As the oak lives long, we are to preserve in doing His work. Again, why does he call us this way?

Because we are invited to join God in the restoration he envisions:

Isaiah 61:4 (NIV2011)

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.

God being all powerful could easily wave his hand and restore all that was lost, and is lost, but he chooses not to do so. He calls on his people, those oaks of righteousness, to join him in making restoration happen. He does this so that:

Isaiah 61:9 (NIV2011)

⁹ ... All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the LORD has blessed.”

Quite often when we hear the words of Isaiah, whether spoken by him or read by Jesus at the start of his ministry, we hear only that the year of the Lord’s favor is here. What we can miss is that God’s salvation is meant to transform the world here and now, and that we are to play an active role in making that happen. That’s why God calls out a people as oaks of righteousness. They are a people to be strong and firmly rooted. A people to provide sustenance and shelter in His name in the here and now.

Cynthia Jarvis has this to say in her commentary on Isaiah:

“The prophet had been anointed and sent to a nation divided, where leaders played to privilege, justice was for sale, and iniquity persisted. He bore good news to a religious community where acrimony rather than accord won the day, where a rigid sectarianism rather than an expansive embrace of the other prevailed. (sounds eerily familiar)...

...the word of the prophet concerning the invisible "other" simply intensifies the dissonance between the national ruins we apparently do not care to rebuild and the reign of God. Alongside the backdrop of

war, injustice, poverty, and greed, the word of the prophet taunts a nation that has grown rich in things but poor in soul. ...

... would it not be more pastoral to speak in generalities, play along with the culture's merrier *kitsch-mas* and, by definition, keep all of these unpleasant realities offstage? ...

But what if, instead, we dared to be specific? What if, to begin locally, we named those conditions closeted in the human heart and made acute by the culture's merriment: the relationships severed, the addictions hidden, the violence barely domesticated, the depression denied, the affair raging, the self-loathing cut deep into the flesh, the greed, the hatred, the fear? What if, to think globally, we named those peoples refused a room at the inns of privilege: the elderly poor, children without health care, refugees of Syria, the homeless schizophrenic? Have we not been anointed to bring good news to these? No doubt the prophet's word will not sound like good news initially. As Flannery O'Connor once wrote to a friend, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us, and the change is painful." Yet the God who can build up ancient ruins is also the God who can redeem the ruin a prodigal son believes he has made of his life; the God who shall raise up the former devastations is also the God who means to pick up a daughter's broken parts; the God who shall repair the ruined cities and the devastations of many generations

is also the God who can repair even the ruined nation that has forgotten its way in the world.”

In the year 2020, much as gone wrong: a global pandemic, socio-economic hardships because of the pandemic, extreme natural disasters cited as the result of global warming caused by neglect of our stewardship of the planet, and society torn apart by so many different -isms: ageism, sexism, racism, crony-ism, and the list goes on. Just as in the days of Isaiah and Jesus there are many around the world who are oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, and in prison.

Much as the captives in Babylon and the Israelites under Roman rule, we cry out to God to do something in response to the sad state of the world. As we cry out, I hear the words of Matthew West’s song, “Do Something” running through my mind:

I woke up this morning
Saw a world full of trouble now
I thought, “How’d we ever get so far down?”
And, “How’s it ever gonna turn around?”
So, I turned my eyes to Heaven,
I thought, “God, why don’t You do something?”

Well, I just couldn’t bear the thought of
People living in poverty,

Children sold into slavery,
The thought disgusted me.
So, I shook my fist at Heaven,
I said, "God, why don't You do something?"
He said, "I did." Yeah. "I created you"

Yes, God has created us to be his oaks of righteousness in the world today. We are the ones to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, to be the beacon of hope for all to see, and thereby bring glory and honor to our God. I pray that we can emulate the oak, by being strong and rooted in our God, to bring shelter and comfort to a hurting world in His name.

May it be so in this season of Christmas and in the years to come. AMEN

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