

17 December 2023

Sermon by Isaac De Jongh.

**The Lord be with you.**

May I speak to you in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent.

**The themes for today:**

Restoration and renewal. Waiting for the day of the Lord. Sanctify.

**Readings:**

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-18

Do you think that most of our neighbors outside of these doors know that we are in the season of Advent? I don't. And even if they do, I'd be willing to bet that they think of Advent as nothing more than a time to prepare for Christmas. And while that is probably true even in our everyday lives, in here, Advent isn't primarily about Jesus' coming at Christmas – his First Coming – this time is about preparing for his Second Coming in Judgment. Because of our ignorance and blindness, we have become so used to the idea that it does not have an impact on our Spiritual journey as Christians. I believe that Advent like Lent should be very important season in the formation of our Spiritual journey to be healed, to be changed, to be transformed and to inspired by the Holy Spirit.

I have asked this question before? What have changed this year in the parish that is different to the other years that you have been a member. I have spoken to quite a few members and all indicated that they have experienced **revival, renewal, restoration and all felt a sense of belonging**. What do you think?

**Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11.**

God's anointed is sent to the oppressed, to the ones whose hearts are crushed, to the captives, the imprisoned and to all who mourn. Though unstated, in order to reach those persons, God's anointed must, of necessity, confront the perpetrators and sources of oppression, marginalization, hopelessness and despair.

The mourning in Isaiah 61 rises out of frustration and humiliation over the failure to rebuild the city and the temple to match its former glory and the failure to reconcile the economic disparities and the religious and political factions within the city. The reality of life in Jerusalem was nothing like the expectations for a restored Jerusalem and a righteous community as proclaimed by the prophets and as envisioned by those returning to Jerusalem.

The comfort God's anointed is instructed to provide to the despairing in Jerusalem will, however, change the way the people see themselves, the way they are regarded by others and the ways they act. Instead of the ashes on their heads — a sign of humiliation and grief — they are given a festive headdress.

They are treated as honored guests and anointed with “the oil of gladness”. To replace their dull spirits, they are given mantles of praise. They are to be treated as and they are to become other than the humiliated, fragmented, dispirited and exploitative people that they currently are. Then they will accomplish what is needed and what has been too difficult: rebuilding Jerusalem as a city where righteousness and justice flourish.

The urgency and enormity of the building task are underscored in the description of what the comforted mourners will raise up and repair: “the former devastations...the devastations of many generations.” Contemporary readers cannot see the devastation of ancient Jerusalem but can see “the devastations of many generations” in the world today: in the mud mountains of buried bodies, homes and livelihoods in Gaza and Ukraine; in the acres of empty apartments that once housed thousands of families in the Gaza and Ukraine with no intension of ending the war; in our own country, mile after mile of corrugated tin dwellings in informal settlements with no hope of a better life; with the devastation of the storms caused by climate change we see in the splintered remains of homes, schools, businesses and churches across the world; in our own spaces and situations of despair, hopelessness and uncertainty we cannot stop praying for the anointed to come.

Transforming the “former devastations” will require more than a memory of the past and a promise to build. It will require that the people of Jerusalem adopt, like God, a love of justice and a hatred of “robbery and wrongdoing” (verse 8).

A new future is possible because God promises to be in “everlasting covenant with them” (verse 8) and because God has provided the appropriate work clothes: garments of salvation and robes of righteousness (verses 9-10). The city where hopelessness had taken root will, by God's spirit and by God's blessing, sprout righteousness and praise.

## **Psalm 126.**

Psalm 126 summarizes what those who follow the Lord can expect: both joy and weeping. Yet the joy assures us of hope in our weeping. The writer encourages us to rejoice in God for his past faithfulness, and to hope for more rejoicing because of God's future faithfulness.

We all go through hard times, and sometimes when you are in the thick of sorrow, it feels like it will never end. When you wake up each morning to tears, and you go to bed each evening with tears, it is difficult to see your way forward. You begin to lose hope. You begin to wonder, “Is this all that God has for me? Will I ever be happy again?”

When you are going through a time of deep sorrow, Psalm 126 is strong medicine for your soul. It carries a powerful message of hope. It tells you that times of trouble and sorrow do not last. It tells you that God will turn your sorrow to joy and your tears to laughter. It even tells you what you should do while you are waiting.

If you are going through a challenging time right now, I trust that his psalm will speak to your heart this morning. Let me tell you right up front, whatever you're going through, it will get better. God will change your tears to joy. I know it seems hard to believe, but it was hard to believe for the Jews returning to Jerusalem, too.

## **1 Thessalonians 5: 16-24.**

Paul starts with the "living now" part. He concludes his list of brief commands with the prayer: **may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.** What does it mean to be "sanctified?" To "sanctify" means to be set apart, to be made holy. We can use this building as an illustration of sanctification. We don't use this space to screen secular movies or any other event that is unspiritual and will put us in a bad light – this place of worship is set apart from the mundane things of this world; it is set apart for the worship of the one true God. In the same way, we, in both our private and public lives, are to be set apart from this sinful world; set apart for service to God alone.

But what does this mean, practically speaking? That's what Paul was describing in the previous verses: rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Do not extinguish the Spirit. Do not treat prophecies with contempt. But test everything. Hold on to the good. Keep away from every kind of evil. Does that describe you? I often find it hard to be joyful and to find time to pray – especially in this busy and stressful time of year. I probably tend to gripe and complain as much as – and probably more than – I take time to give thanks. And even though I know that God wants me to be joyful, prayerful and thankful I often prefer my will over God's. Extinguish the Spirit? I know that my sinful flesh would much rather sit on the couch and turn on Netflix or a football game than engage in serious Bible study – and in that way I'm snuffing out the Spirit's fire and treating God's Word and prophecies with contempt. I'm lazy in testing the things I see and hear and read in the media; I find that the good things of God easily slip out of my hands and that I'm magnetically drawn toward every kind of evil. I don't think I could honestly describe myself as "sanctified," "set apart," and "holy," – could you? Would you be bold enough to claim that you embody Paul's description of what it means to live as a justified and sanctified Christian?

That's why Paul prays...both for the Thessalonians and for us. He prays for God to do the sanctifying, the setting apart – because we are incapable of doing it ourselves. And this isn't the first time Paul prayed this prayer. Back in chapter 3, he wrote: may the Lord increase your love and make it overflow for each other and for all people, just as ours does for you, so that he may establish your hearts as blameless in holiness before our God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his saints (1 Thessalonians 3:12-13). How does God do this sanctifying? Through the means of grace – and specifically through Holy Baptism. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, by cleansing her with the washing of water in connection with the Word. He did this so that he could present her to himself as a glorious church, having no stain or wrinkle or any such thing, but so that she would be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25-27). One of the rituals that have traditionally been associated with baptism and confirmation have reflected this fact. When infants and

confirmands are clothed in white gowns it is a visible illustration of the invisible truth that through Baptism Jesus' blood has cleansed us from all sin, has washed away all of our impurities, has sanctified us and set us apart from this sinful world for God.

But God's sanctifying work in our lives doesn't end there. In Baptism God not only washes away our sinfulness but empowers us to live in holiness. We can attest this to this statement of faith "Baptism means that the old Adam in us should be drowned by daily contrition and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever" This is the work of the Holy Spirit. From the moment you were baptized the Holy Spirit has been working in your heart, giving you a new will, new impulses, an inner desire to live for God and others – not only for yourself. Because you've been baptized – that is what you are. That is why I don't have to yell and scream at you to be joyful and prayerful and thankful; to hold onto the good and avoid every kind of evil. No, even your presence here in God's house today is proof that the Holy Spirit is at work in your heart – setting you in thought, word, and action apart from the sinful world. You are living proof that Paul was right when he said the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.

That's the "living now" part. The other part, the "setting your sights on the Day to come," is this: and may your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Would you? Do you consider yourself blameless – that on Judgment Day no one, not even God, would be able to blame you for any evil?

### **John 1: 6-8, 19-28.**

God has chosen John and commissioned his role as a witness to Jesus. John's witness transcends all of time as he bears witness to the light that has come into a darkened world: "He (John) came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

The priest and Levites ask John, "Who are you?" Literally, "You, who are you?" putting the emphasis on the "you" and putting him on the spot. And John answers them, literally and emphatically, "I, I am not the Christ." Notice, they ask him who he is, and he answers with who he isn't. "I am not the Christ." They hadn't mentioned the Christ, but John does. John had been preaching a powerful message of repentance, calling the nation to repentance. He was preaching end-time judgment and salvation. Therefore, thoughts of the Christ, the Messiah—the end-time deliverer promised by God from long ago—these thoughts were not too far away, they were "in the air." And John says, "No, I am not him." "But somebody else is," that's the implication. The Christ is nearby, he's right at hand. He is "the coming one," and he is coming right away.

If you were asked, who are you and what makes you a follower of Jesus Christ? What gives you a sense of belonging? If you have listened to 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 this morning, I believe that if it made an impact on you today, you will be able to answer the above without hesitation.

How would you like to be defined in terms of someone else? I mean, who you are, your life and identity—when people think of you, they always compare you to somebody else? Are you like this person? Are you like that person? I suppose it could get old after a while. Why can't people just take you for who you are, on your own terms? Well, today we'll meet someone whose life was always being defined in terms of someone else. And you know what? He was okay with it. And so, this morning we ask the question: "Who Are You, John?"

"Who are you, John?" And here we're referring to John the Baptist. "Who are you, John?" This question occurs, in one form or another, five times in today's Gospel reading. As we hear these questions and answers, we will discover more about John the Baptist—who he is and who he isn't—and more importantly, John will direct us to the one he came to testify about. Oh, and in the process, we will learn more about our own identity, who we are, as a result.

If you think about the tragedies and difficulties of your life: the death of a loved one, an illness, an addiction, a divorce, guilt, the sin that separated you from God, others, and yourself. Answers and explanations did not sustain you. How, when, what, or why was not what you needed to hear. It was the Word of hope that got you through it all. Hope doesn't make life easy. It makes life possible. Hope reminds us that it won't always be like this. There is light and life coming to us. It is already here among us. The world, however, make it difficult for us to hear that other voice, the witness of hope. The world clamor and compete for our attention. They often speak the loudest but the voice of hope has never been silenced.

Which voice do we listen to? Which voice do we follow? Those are questions we must answer every day. The reality of humanity is that we are a people of the wilderness. The reality of God is that God is the God of hope. Do we trust the voice of the wilderness or do we trust the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness? The voice we listen to is the voice with which we will speak. We will become either witnesses or interrogators. We choose who we want to be. Hope is not easy. We must practice hope. It means we rejoice always; we pray without ceasing, we give thanks in all circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). These practices enable us to both hear and become the voice of hope.

If we **belong**, we begin to **believe** and ultimately, we **behave** and become followers of Christ as we pray the prayer of Teresa of Avila.

Let us pray:

"Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes with which He look  
Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which He blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are His body.  
Christ has no body now but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,

Yours are the eyes with which He looks  
Compassion on this world,  
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

Amen.