



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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December 11, 2011
3rd Sunday of Advent

Sermon Text: [Isaiah 61:1-3, 10, 11](#)
Pastor David Scherbarth

First Lesson: [Isaiah 61:1-3, 10, 11](#)

Psalm of the Day: [Psalm 71](#)

Second Lesson: [1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#)

Gospel Lesson: [John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

You Live in the Year of the Lord's Favor

The Lord God of heaven and earth has prepared a message for you and for me today. That's what this gathering is all about. That's why we are here. God himself has been watching us. God understands that we stand in the third week of the Advent season. He understands we are getting our hearts and our lives ready for the celebration that changes everything. So today, the Lord invites us to come into his house, to leave everything in our life out there, and to focus our attention on what God has to share with us. I can tell you today that the message recorded in Isaiah 61 is a message that will change your life. It's a message that's filled with good news. When you hear that news and understand it with the faith that God wrote in your heart, it will make this hour that you are spending right here today to be the most special hour that you've had for the entire week. An hour so amazing that it will get you ready for all the week to come...that's how astonishing this message is. God calls it "good news."

He says "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news." The news that God shares with us in this text is so amazing that it changes everything. It is so powerful that if in your life there is anything that you would call bad news, something you don't like, things that aren't the way you want them to be, this good news will overwhelm that and make it seem like it's not there.

Think for a minute...what news could you possibly hear today that would change everything in your life right now? What news could be so amazing that it would wipe out any bad news in your life and put a smile in your heart that can't go away? On the surface we might think "That's not possible! Have you seen my life? Look at the stuff going on in my life!" There's lots of stuff that you're not going to smile about. The Lord would say "Listen closely" because he's put me in this pulpit today to tell you this good news. The simple good news is this...you live in the year of the Lord's favor.

I urge you to keep this text in front of you; that's why I put it in the worship guide. Watch through this text. Fix your eyes on what God says. It's astonishing. You live in the year of the Lord's favor. That's the good news.

Isaiah wrote this news. God wrote it first through him. Isaiah wrote it to a people first who were kind of experts on bad news. They were the Israelites in the time of captivity. They had been carried off by Babylon into a foreign land where they were slaves. They were there so long that they had children and the children were born slaves. They looked forward to a future when their children would have children, and they would be

slaves. There was no good news. There was no way to change their situation. There was nothing to smile about. Every day their life told them that God had turned his back on them and they couldn't change that. This was a people accustomed to bad news.

But what does God do? He fills his prophet Isaiah with his Word and he says, "Here's what I want you to do. Go to those frowning people and tell them 'I have good news for you,' because they are not used to hearing it and they desperately need to hear it." I don't think things have changed too much in our time today.

We aren't slaves in a foreign land, but we are no strangers to bad news either, are we? Every single person in this room, every single one, is well acquainted with the concept of bad news. We've experienced it in our lives. I would suspect that some of us came into church today with bad news going on right now in our lives in one way, shape or form. It happens. It's so common in our lives that we fix our minds on it all the time without even knowing it.

I went to church this last Thanksgiving. I visited another church in the Appleton area. When we went into church, they handed us a slip of paper. It was Thanksgiving so they were doing this special thing with the paper and a pencil. They said, "In the 10 minutes before church, I want you to write down something you're thankful for, and then go put it on the altar." It sounds so simple, right? Do you know that it took me the whole 10 minutes? I didn't quite know what to write down. And I was struggling with it, kind of laughing at myself thinking "What are you doing? There is all kinds of stuff in your life." But I thought along the way as I was doing it, "If they had told me to write down stuff I don't like going on in my life, I'd need more paper." That would be no problem. We're so used to seeing bad news in our life and so used to thinking about it that it dominates who we are. And God knows.

God knows how you struggle with economic problems. He knows that we wrestle with job fears and with money issues and with mortgages that are going up and house values that are declining. He knows that. He knows how we struggle with health problems and how we know people that are sick and people we love who are struggling. He knows how personal problems affect our lives and how sometimes our marriages don't work out like we want, and divorce tears them apart, and our families are torn by dissension, and people we love die. God knows all of this bad news and sees it and how it affects our heart.

So he brings us together in his house today, in this sea of bad news everywhere you look, and says, "Tell them there's good news. Tell them the good news of the year of the Lord's favor." That's what God wants me to announce to you today. God wants me to tell you that he favors you. He wants me to absolutely assure you of this one thing in your life right now...God is 100% on your side. God right now is completely committed to blessing you. Your God is so committed to blessing you that he hangs on every word you speak when you pray, hangs on it, and is eager to respond. That's the good news. The year of the Lord's favor.

With that news, God is addressing the heart of bad news. Do you know that bad news is a spiritual thing? It's a theological problem. It carries a spiritual message. When you are sitting in the doctor's office and the doctor has this frown on his face saying "Ohhh, I got these tests for you, and I don't know what to do about it." You and I are thinking spiritual questions. We are thinking, "Where is God when I need him? Why didn't he fix this? Why didn't he stop this from coming to my doorstep?" That's the message in bad news. It's telling us, "Is God there? Has he let you down? Has he forgotten about you?" Then our conscience kicks in, right? The conscience that tells us "maybe God's been paying attention. Maybe God knows me. Maybe he watches how I'm not the most perfect person in his family. Maybe he sees how I don't always serve him in my life because I'm so concerned about serving me. And maybe he has decided now is the time to remember and that's what the bad news is about." God listens to the thoughts of our heart.

He comes to us today and says "Stop it. There's good news here. Here's the thing you should know." God is 100% on your side. No bad news in your life changes that. No event in your life can be so catastrophic that it can alter that truth. Your God is right next to you taking care of you every step of the way.

Along about now, if you're grabbing onto this message and thinking about it in the context of your life, you may be wondering how I can even say those words so confidently to you. I don't know you. You don't know me. I don't know what's happening in your life right now. Those are your private details. So how can I possibly assure you in this context that God is on your side? The answer is easy. It doesn't have anything to do with you. It has to do with the one speaking the words here. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me"...did you see the personal pronoun for *I* and *me*? Jesus is talking. Seven hundred years later Jesus came to this earth after Isaiah wrote these words, and when he walked into the synagogue in Nazareth, he pulled out the Bible, opened it up here and said these words. Then he looked at all of us and said, "Now these words are fulfilled in your hearing."

The reason Jesus came to this earth was to earn God's favor for us. His perfect life pleased the Lord. His keeping all the Commandments and serving God faithfully substituted for you and me. And his dying on the cross wiped away every time when we let this God down. Through Jesus Christ your God stands before you and me in his Word and assures us in our lives at this moment, count on this...your God is 100% on your side. Count on him. Your God is eager to bless you now. Count on him and be confident when you pray to him because that's your new reality. It changes everything.

That's why God goes on in this text to say, "I'm here to bring good news to the poor." We hear a lot about poverty today. All the politicians trying to get elected are talking about it. Apparently they counted the noses to see how many poor people are out there and figure if they can all get them to vote for them they'll get elected easily. There's a lot of poverty out there. There's a lot of pain out there. There's a lot of

worried people out there. And you think the only cure for the poverty is more money. If you could just hand out a bunch of checks, everybody would be fine. Or so some politicians seem to think. God has a better answer.

God comes to us and says “You don’t need to worry about your poverty.” Yours is a God who opens his hands and satisfies the desire of every living thing. What are you worried about? Yours is a God who feeds the sparrows and the tiny little birds all winter long. Surely you are worth much more than a sparrow. Your God died for you. And he knows what you have need of. This God is so much on your side that when the Israelites traveled through the desert in the wilderness for 40 years, they went to bed every night with their cupboard empty, not even a can of soup in the house. And every morning they got up and there was food. That’s your God. “Don’t worry about anything that has to do with poverty,” God says, because the Lord is on your side and your needs will be taken care of. Everything is okay.

God says this news changes the life of people who are broken hearted. “He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,” he says. It’s tough when something happens in your life that breaks your heart. Usually those things have a sense of permanence about them. Divorce that breaks your marriage seems so permanent that you’d grieve forever about it. Someone that you love dies...gravestones have a very permanent look to them. They don’t seem to ever change after that. So when our hearts are broken, we tend to think we have to carry that sorrow forever. The Lord comes to us today and says, “You’re wrong. The Lord is on your side. You stand in the year of the Lord’s favor.” Even your broken heart is only a temporary thing. Trust this God. The One who knew how to bless you in years past knows how to bless you in the years ahead. There’s hope and confidence and joy that lies ahead of you no matter how hard your heart may be broken right now.

Remember Job in the Bible? This is a man who knew about a broken heart. He lost all 10 of his children. One day a storm came out of the desert and knocked the house down and killed all the children. One day! Imagine the grief! He lost all of his wealth. One day! Marauders came and stole it all. Imagine the grief! Job’s wife came to him on that day and said “Why don’t you stop trusting God? Curse God and die because he is obviously not on your side.” Job knew what you and I know today. The Lord was with him. So Job told his wife, “Though he slay me, I will yet trust him!”

That’s your God. He’s on your side today. No matter what grief fills your life. No matter how permanent it might seem, know this truth. Your God is with you. You live in his favor. And ahead of you are days of blessing. There will be reason to smile again. God promises.

There’s one more thing. God says “Proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor to those who are in prison and who are captive. Proclaim liberty to the captives.” That’s the best news of all. We don’t see ourselves as captive you and I. That’s not how we think. That’s not how it feels. But it is the spiritual reality when we are born. Everybody is born into this world created by God for a purpose. That purpose is to serve him. Only

we can't because we are born with the chains of sin wrapped around our heart, and that fills us with an overwhelming selfishness. Little babies are born wanting what they want right now, and it never goes away. We get older and older and we think "Boy, if I could just get what I want, then I'd be happy." It's not true. It's a lie. People chase down that path of selfishness captive by the hearts of sin and they are miserable all their lives. They think it's just because they don't get their way enough.

God comes to us today and says, "Tell them. Tell them they are free." Tell them that the Lord has set them free from the selfishness in their heart so now, out of love for God, we can use our lives to serve him, to be a blessing to others out of love for God and find the joy that God intended, to live in freedom instead of slavery.

This news changes everything. The good news of the year of the Lord's favor. All the things that seem to be problems change when the Lord stands by your side. There was a shepherd boy who stood in front of a 9-foot giant. The 9-foot giant wasn't a problem as soon as the shepherd boy knew "There's the Lord standing with me. Boy, is that giant in trouble." That's how it is for you and me.

So at this place, this room has to become special ground that you come into every week. A place for celebration. The Lord talks about it in this way. He says, "Give to them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit, that they may be called oaks of righteousness." It says, "God has clothed me with the garment of salvation and covered me with the robe of righteousness and as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress or a bride adorns herself with jewels." What he is saying in plain English...when you come here, when you walk out of your life out there with whatever challenges you are facing and come onto this ground, you come for only one reason. This is a place for celebration.

So Isaiah suggests, in picture language, your clothes ought to match. Put on your celebration clothes. Wear your best party dress. This is a place to come for joy. You have reason to rejoice because the Lord favors you. You don't hear that much out there. The Lord favors you. Celebrate that in here. Not just with the clothes you wear. Celebrate it with your actions. He says, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My soul shall exalt in my God." This is ground for joy. This is a place where altogether with raise our voices and praise this God who is on our side. This is the place where we all celebrate the same thing...that our lives are founded on good news. There is this God, and he treasures us and therefore, all is well.

You have comfort to give each other. You might share today that things in your life didn't go like you planned it this week. And when you share that with someone here, they'll say right back to you, "But everything is fine, because the Lord himself is with you, so he'll turn this into a blessing. Count on it and let's rejoice." That's why this place is special. That's why you're in a sense privileged. That's why it changes your life.

It's the strangest thing. What difference does talking make? What difference does a message from the Bible make? You came into this house of God and out there you left whatever you left, all kinds of challenges. The news is, when you go back out there, they'll be waiting for you. If you had a mortgage to pay on the way in, it's waiting for you on the way out. If you had a car that wasn't working quite right on the way in, it's probably not going to be fixed on the way home. These are challenges that are still there. But it's all different just the same. If God is with me, if God favors me, then all of these things aren't a problem at all. My God will see me through. Everything will be fine.

Many years ago, I was just out of seminary, and I had a mission church in Rhode Island. They gave me a whole state. I got to start a church. I was the only guy with his own state. I went there, and on one occasion I went to a hospital. So I'm in Rhode Island where one of my members had a relative who was in intensive care. We were sitting in the waiting room, and there was this other family there. It's a huge Catholic family. Everybody was Catholic in Rhode Island, that's why they sent me there. Anyway, there is this grandma, and she was like 100 years old (at least she looked like that because I was in my 20s). There were her grandchildren and her children, and all of them were visibly upset. The children were upset. The grandchildren were upset. They were fluttering around the room because apparently the grandfather was really ill. The only one calm in the room was this ancient grandmother. I couldn't help but watch her. She sat there, dressed in black. She sat there in her chair, and they were all around her fluttering and upset and expressing words of concern. To each one she says, "It will be fine. You have to believe. It will be okay. God is on our side." I couldn't help but notice how calm she was and how much she trusted and what affect it had on the people around her.

That's what is happening here. God is on your side. God is with you. Tell that to one another. Fill your heart with that news. Put aside any fear you have and rejoice. This is a message that changes your life. Chances are in the week to come you are going to run into things that don't go exactly your way. That's how it goes in life, but when those moments come, make sure you pull out Isaiah 61. Get your Bibles open to that. Leave it right open on the table. Walk by it each day. Make sure you read these words that God announces good news to you. You live in the year of the Lord's favor.

May that news cheer your heart every day and fill you with joy and confidence as you live to serve this God that set you free.