

“God’s Anointed”

The Reverend Anna Dickson

Date: December 10, 2023



Who here had an absolutely wonderful time this morning at this year’s Christmas Pageant? Didn’t our children do an amazing job telling the story? When the prophet Isaiah shares God’s dream for us he says, “and a little child shall lead them” - and I think it is safe to say our children helped us catch a glimpse of that dream this morning as they led us faithfully and with joy.

I can’t sit through a children’s Christmas pageant without being reminded of a particular rendition I witnessed several years back. It was an intergenerational pageant, with an older gentleman whose voice rivaled that of Morgan Freeman’s reading the story...and the young children making up most of the animal population in their Halloween costumes (yes, one year, there was more than one lobster at the birth of Jesus). At that church, the coveted roles for our youth were not Mary or Joseph, not even the angels or the shepherds. At that church, the part everyone wanted to play was the Bethlehem Star. And the competition was fierce.

What you need to understand about that is that the entire youth group would show up to watch the pageant, mostly to see if the person cast as the star could pull off the costume.

It was this big, golden, plush thing that went on overhead, so that the actor’s face stuck out underneath the top point. And then, it required that the person inside stretch out their arms like this to keep the star’s shape. It was a dare of a costume. Because the star was one of the first “characters” on stage, and they had to hold their arms like this for the duration of the performance. Do you have any idea how long 20 minutes can be?

Now we knew that what drew the youth group to the performance was not necessarily devout piety so much as it was witnessing a friend of theirs attempt the star challenge. And in the particular year I’m thinking of, the star led the shepherds to the scene of Jesus’ birth and assumed the position. There were holy snickers in the pews. Someone even started a stopwatch, I think, as we all enjoyed, I admit it, we all enjoyed watching the teenager in the star struggle to keep his arms parallel to the floor.

And that is when Baby Jesus, played by a real infant that year but in no years after that one, absolutely LOST IT. The infant Lord did not issue a meek and mild whimper. It was a full bodied wail. And the pageant came to an unexpected halt as we all tried to figure out what to do next, and teenage Mary is sort of rocking the baby with a look of terror on her face, and Jesus’ real mother is in the front pew trying to decide what to do, and finally, blessedly, she went up to get him, and the minute he was in her arms, he was quiet. The prince of peace, indeed.

Y’all, the relief that swept through that sanctuary was a tidal wave. For everyone, but the ole Bethlehem Star, whose 20 minute challenge had been extended to 25 or so, and who was hanging on for dear life, an uncomfortable smile on his face, trying not to droop like a melted candle in the chaos.

Isaiah 61 is good news for anyone among us who can relate to that star. And I’m not just talking about those buckling under the crushing weight of Christmas cheer that moves at a clip and stretches our calendars to hold

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more than they were designed to and places undue financial strain on us in a consumerist culture that insists that more things equals more love.

It’s deeper than that, isn’t it? We need good news for people for whom a silly example only nods in the direction of the exhaustion they feel from holding themselves - and sometimes their loved ones - up and together. It’s full-on Christmas out there, I know, but in here it is Advent, which means that, in here, we make room to name that, for some of us, this is a season like every other. Because grief doesn’t take a Christmas vacation. And entrenched conflict overseas and in our families doesn’t either. Nor does systemic poverty. We need good news for those for whom returning home means revisiting ancient ruins and former devastations. For those who have been keeping up appearances and carrying heavy burdens on drooping shoulders, it is a season like every other, the pressure to grin and bear it made more acute, perhaps, by the surrounding culture’s jubilation.

And it is into this season, like every other, that the prophet speaks a counter-word to those in need of one. Isaiah 61 is addressed to a people living in the wake of exile, who have returned home again. To our ears, the phrase “the year of the Lord’s favor” sounds like a general affirmation of God’s provision, but ancient ears would have heard in those words the specific proclamation of Jubilee - which was a time of economic, cultural, environmental and communal reset, when the land and people rest, and all those who are held captive are set free to return to their communities. Jubilee. It’s a proclamation of a rebuilt and restored community - and it doesn’t come to the powerful, the privileged, and the pulled together.

This word comes to the broken-hearted in need of healing. And to those who long for freedom from that which keeps them stuck. It flings wide the prison doors of those who have been unjustly incarcerated. It wraps itself like a weighted blanket around those who mourn, heavy with mercy. And this - this - the prophet says, will be a sign to the nations. Look, he says, and see what is possible with God.

Human community as God intends it - healed, free, and just. It is a very this-worldly picture of salvation. One that “reveals God’s special concern for the lowest and the weakest,” the hurting and the faint of spirit. And. And it is these folks who are called “God’s anointed”. They are not merely passive recipients, but the ones whom the prophet says will be specially appointed to enact this jubilee word, to be priests, in other words, for their people who have returned to a home that needs to be rebuilt and repaired.

One of the most loved definitions of vocation comes from Frederick Buechner, who said that your calling is the place “where your deep joy and the world’s deep hunger meet.” And there’s a lot to love about that. For one, Buechner helps us to realize that God’s calling always has something to do with God’s other children, particularly those in need. No matter what God calls you to do, it will always draw your heart closer to the lives and hunger of other people. For another, God calls you to examine what makes you truly joyful, what you find truly meaningful - and to use your gifts to bring more of that thing into the world. In other words, you don’t have to do it all, but you are invited to give something, and along the way discover a richer life than you would have had otherwise.

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It’s a great definition of vocation. And...it makes it easy to conclude that vocation is something we do from a place of relative strength, or ease, or fullness, doesn’t it? If you were to draw the quote on a piece of paper, you might be tempted to list all gladness, gifts, strengths on one side and all the world’s hunger and need on the other...and then conclude that calling is all about applying Column A to Column B.

I think the prophet Isaiah would challenge that interpretation. I think he would urge us to see that God calls those living in the reality of the world’s deep hunger to minister from within and among their people. In Isaiah 61, who are God’s anointed? They are the mourners who receive a mission, the poor a purpose, the captives a calling. And this will be for the healing of all of us. This will be the Jubilee.

Before she was a minister, Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber was a stand-up comedian in recovery. She tells the story of her call to ministry as it came to her in the context of a smoke-filled parish hall where she gathered with others to encourage each other in their journeys of sobriety. They gave themselves a nickname. The Rowing Team.

‘We were a cranky bunch, whose lives were in various states of repair,’ she said, not “a ship of fools so much as a rowboat of idiots....A little rowing team, paddling furiously, sometimes for each other, sometimes for ourselves, and when one of us jumped ship, we’d all have to paddle harder.” The majority of the Rowing Team were fellow comics, whom Bolz-Weber says “tell truths you can only see from the underside of the psyche.”

Her call came the day one her beloved Rowing Team friends, PJ, succumbed to a death of despair. And the group turned to her, the most religious among them, and said, “You do the service.”

Which she did, “on a crisp fall day at the Comedy Works club in downtown Denver, with a full house. The alcoholic rowing team and the Denver comics, the comedy club staff and the academics: these were my people,” she writes. And it was in giving PJ’s eulogy that she realized that, perhaps, she was supposed to be their pastor.

This is what she says about that experience:

“It’s not that I felt pious and nurturing. It’s that there, in that underground room filled with the smell of stale beer and bad jokes, I looked around and saw more pain and questions and loss than anyone, including myself, knew what to do with. And I saw God. God right there with the comics standing along the wall with crossed arms, as if their snarky remarks to each other would keep those embarrassing emotions away. God, right there with the woman climbing down the stage stairs after sharing a little too much...God, among the cynics” and the grieving.

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She continues,

“I am not the only one who sees the underside and God at the same time. There are lots of us...It was here in the midst of my own community of underside dwellers that I couldn’t help but begin to see the Gospel, the life-changing reality that God is not far off, but here among the brokenness of our lives. And having seen it,” she says, “I couldn’t help but point it out. For reasons I’ll never quite understand I realized that I had been called to proclaim the Gospel from the place where I am....”

I don’t know the place where you are today. I don’t know if you’re a drooping star doing your best just to hang on. I don’t know what you’re holding in your heart, or whether it’s the kind of thing that can break a heart wide open. I don’t know whether you’re stuck, and what it is that is binding you or the last time you felt truly free. What I do know is that as I look out, I see God among you. God among us...

And I know this, too: from within and among his people, aware of their pain and questions and loss, Jesus stood up to preach his first public sermon, and the scripture he took on his lips that day was from Isaiah 61. There in that Nazareth synagogue, he declared “The spirit of the Lord is upon me...because the Lord has anointed me...to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to bring liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.” It was an echo of a prophetic promise passed down.

And he didn’t do this from a place of relative strength, or ease, or fullness. And he didn’t do this from some far away place. He echoed the prophet’s words standing within and among God’s people - the ones living in the reality of the world’s great hunger - and he shared their weakness, their challenges, and their longing. He got so close he let himself get covered in the ashes of what once was in order to adorn them with garland, to anoint them with the oil of gladness in exchange for their faint spirits...revealing to the world God’s special concern for...and God’s special anointing of...those who have known the underside...calling them to a ministry of restoration and repair.

Advent is all about remembering, not just *that* Jesus came, but *why* and *to whom*. And so, this year, if you long to see Jesus, then look for him within and among the people with whom he identified. And don’t stand far off. Draw near to those who are grieving. Break bread with those who are broken. Hold hope for the captives to embrace the freedom that is already on offer. Look and listen to the good news in voices that might break as they tell it.

And if you count yourself among their number, be assured that your brokenness is right where God’s deep joy will meet you. Surely, good news of great joy is on the way.

May it be so, O Lord. May it be so. Amen.