

**“Sent”**

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Season of Epiphany, Sunday, January 16, 2011  
*[First Preached on Sunday, December 14, 2008]*  
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Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11    John 1: 6-8, 19-28

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

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.  
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,  
they shall raise up the former devastations;  
they shall repair the ruined cities,  
the devastations of many generations.*

*8 For I the LORD love justice,  
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.  
9 Their descendants shall be known among the nations,  
and their offspring among the peoples;  
all who see them shall acknowledge  
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.  
10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise*

to spring up before all the nations.

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

<sup>6</sup> There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup> He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup> He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. <sup>9</sup> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

<sup>19</sup> This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" <sup>20</sup> He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." <sup>21</sup> And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." <sup>22</sup> Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

<sup>23</sup> He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
'Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said.

<sup>24</sup> Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup> They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" <sup>26</sup> John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup> the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." <sup>28</sup> This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

### Sermon

#### **Sent**

Denzel Washington knows what it is like to be sent.

Denzel Washington has two Academy Awards, countless fans,  
a terrific family, a son who graduated from Morehouse College,  
and acting talent that just won't quit.

Yet he almost never came to make it out of East Harlem in NYC.

Someone besides God first had to believe in him.

Denzel said, "*My mother never gave up on me.*

*I messed up in school so much they were sending me home,  
but my mother sent me right back.*"

#### **Sent**

Who sent you?

Where are you being sent?

Where do you need to go?

Thomas Merton (January 31, 1915 – December 10, 1968)

was a 20th century Catholic writer.

He served God as a Trappist monk of the Abbey of Gethsemani in KY.

One day at the Abbey he received a long distance phone call.

The caller said he had just read one of Thomas Merton's books,

and he believed that God was calling to him through Merton's words,  
telling him to get up and go,  
that God was sending him from Brooklyn to Kentucky,  
in order to serve God by praying alongside Merton.  
Thomas Merton listened carefully, and then asked him, *"Where are you?"*  
*"Hey, I'm in Brooklyn."*  
Merton: *"Yes, I gather that. Where are you right now?"*  
*"Oh, I am in a phone booth on the street."*  
Merton: *"Describe for me what you see."*  
So the caller described the trucks and cars, the shops and homes,  
the trees and the park across the street.  
*"Now describe for me the people you see,"* said Merton.  
So the man described the people he saw walking by,  
the school children and parents, the drivers and storekeepers.  
*"Those are your people,"* said Merton.  
*"The people you see now are the people to whom God is sending you to be with,*  
*to serve and to love and pray alongside,*  
*to fight for and to be a balm of healing.*  
*Those are your people. God is sending you to them."*

### **Sent**

A student of the prophet Isaiah was also sent.  
He experienced the call of God,  
a call sending him forth to serve and love the people  
whom God placed before him.  
When he reflected on his call he said, *"God has sent me."*

*"The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,  
because the LORD has anointed me;  
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,  
to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a garland instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,  
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit."*

He was sent to bring joy, not despair,  
gladness instead of mourning, praise instead of put downs.  
He was sent to work for justice and to make peace real,  
and not simply a dream.  
Isaiah grasped that the Gospel is social;  
prayer without good works is empty piety,  
and justice without spirituality is groundless.

Robert Kennedy embodied these words of Isaiah when he said,  
*"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief  
that human history is shaped.  
Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal,  
or acts to improve the lot of others,  
or strikes out against injustice,  
he [or she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope."*

### **Sent**

God brings us out of the wilderness  
and sends us into our own environments.  
All ministry is done in context.  
Isaiah's context became his ministry, a ministry of meaning and joy.  
What is your context?  
Where has the Spirit of God sent you?  
Or where do you anticipate that God is sending you,  
and to whom?  
If you are looking for a pie in the sky religion you will be disappointed,  
or better yet, redirected by the Holy Spirit, because the Gospel is clear.

### **Sent**

Consider well the story of John the Baptist, the messenger, the witness.  
*"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.  
He came as a witness to testify to the light,  
so that all might believe through him.  
He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.  
The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world."*  
I love the Gospel of John, a gospel that weaves philosophy and theology together  
with a can-do spirit of light and love.  
In comparison the Gospel of Mark is urgent;  
Mark shows us that our faith walk is immediate and important.  
The Gospel of Luke looks to social justice  
while the Gospel of Matthew lifts high the Cross for the church.

The Gospel of John helps us to take a step back and look at the big picture.  
We find here the philosophy of the Word,  
waxing poetic, praying for the world,  
and not afraid to ask hard questions that cut to the chase  
and leave us alone to ponder the meaning of the message.  
In the beginning the Gospel introduces John the Baptist  
as one who was sent, sent by God,  
sent out into the wilderness,  
and then sent into the community.  
He was sent to point the way, to move us with a message of a Messiah,  
just as a great pointer, a fine bird dog  
shows anyone who wants to look and learn  
that the One who is to come is, indeed, here.

John responded to his environment.  
He met and listened to those sent to learn from him.  
He wasn't a graduate from Harvard or the London School of Economics;  
    he was simply a man of faith.  
He wasn't a superstar athlete leading the Falcons through the playoffs,  
    or the ace centerfielder the Braves *still* crave;  
    he humbly pointed to God and gave credit where credit was due.

### **Sent**

God sent John.  
Someone sent those who question John.  
Priests and Levites from Jerusalem were sent to ask him, "*Who are you?*"  
He confessed, "*I am not the Messiah.*"  
And they asked him, "*What then? Are you Elijah? Are you the prophet?*"  
He answered, "*No.*"  
Then they said to him, "*Let us have an answer for those who sent us.*"  
John said,  
    "*I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,*  
    '*Make straight the way of the Lord,*' " as the prophet Isaiah said.

God sent John.  
Do you wonder if God sent these folks to confront John,  
    to question him, to learn from him,  
    to discover from him the blessed truth and hope  
    that the way of the Lord is upon us?

### **Sent**

Who sent you?  
Do you ever ask who is God sending to you?  
    And then ask, "*Why?*" (or "*Why me!*")  
I for one do not put a lot of stock in coincidence.  
At a deeply spiritual level,  
    encounters with friends and strangers  
    can become encounters with the divine. Or not.  
When we look at our interactions as holy, then our whole outlook changes.  
We start to look differently  
    at our office mates and fellow students and neighbors.  
    Whom is God sending to you this day, this week, this life?

### **Sent**

Where are you being sent?  
What will you have to offer when you get there?  
When you get to where you are being sent, trust that the gospel is enough.  
Let the love of Christ live in you.  
Let it be set loose.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. faithfully observed and acted on his belief  
    that if we are to live fully into the lives that God intends  
    then we need to build together the beloved community;

should we fail to do so  
the result would be to create chaos.

We have the power to choose chaos or community.

What we do and chose and where God sends us to serve affects our neighbors.

In King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, dated April 16, 1963, he wrote:

*"I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states.  
I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta  
and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham."*

*"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.  
We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,  
tied in a single garment of destiny.*

*Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."*

*"I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you  
can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.*

*This is the inter-related structure of reality."*

With this in mind, let us prayerfully ponder the actions of one man in Tucson who turned a weapon of mass destruction on a crowd of citizens gathered in a public space to discuss issues of the day, shooting 20 and killing 6, including a federal judge, a congresswoman, and a young girl born on September 11, 2001.

Peter King, Senior Writer for Sports Illustrated was moved to write:

*I just ask you to do one thing today: think.*

*Think about our country and what kind of place it's become when a 22-year-old man can freely walk up to a congresswoman and shoot her in the head, and then kill six others, including a federal judge and a 9-year-old girl born on 9/11, whose parents said she wanted to have a job one day to help the less fortunate, and who, according to the Arizona Daily Star, was fond of telling her mother: "We are so blessed. We have the best life."*

*The words of Pima County Sheriff Clarence Dupnik should resonate for us all:*

*"The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on this country is getting to be outrageous. The vitriolic rhetoric that we hear day in and day out from people in the radio business and some people in the TV business..."*

*"This has not become the nice United States that most of us grew up in. It's not unusual for all public officials to get threats constantly, myself included. That's the sad thing about what's going on in America: Pretty soon we're not going to be able to find reasonable decent people willing to subject themselves to serve in public office."*

*Think. I'm not blaming guns, I'm not blaming the right or the left. Time will sort out all of the issues about why Jared Loughner apparently targeted Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords for death. Whatever the reason for Loughner's actions, I don't know*

*how we can continue to listen to the incredible public fury we hear in politics and the political media without it having serious consequences for society.*

*Godspeed, Congresswoman Giffords, and to the 13 other victims trying to recover. My heart goes out to the families of the six who died. I hope the rest of us can just think about Sheriff Dupnik's words and bring a little civility back to civilization.*

### **Sent**

Are you sent to think?

Are you sent to hear? To listen and respond with compassion?

Are you sent to bring a word of hope, of healing, of harmony?

Who will accompany you?

God, yes, and who else?

We are connected to a holy deliverer,

yet we need to be connected to an earthly sender as well.

Denzel Washington figured this out, but we can't all claim his mother.

What we can claim is the church.

The church is the living, breathing Body of Christ

in this environment, in this context

-- is this not the purpose of the church, to accompany one another

on our journeys of faith and hope, of mercy and social justice?

### **Sent**

What message will you bring?

Are you sent to bring joy?

Is your presence the joy God intends?

Joy is the byproduct of faithfulness and trust.

So often we focus on success rather than the process.

We tend to be results-oriented.

But along comes John followed by the Messiah who call us to be faithful,  
to be obedient, to be in relationship with God and one another.

Ever try to make someone else happy?

*How is that working for you? (!)*

Not so good, huh? We are not surprised. Joy comes from within.

George Byron said,

*"All who would win joy must share it; happiness was born a twin."*

The Apostle Paul said, *"Rejoice always, pray constantly,*

*and in all circumstances give thanks."*

Give thanks...away.

Give joy away, and discover what it means to be happy.

Our greatest disappointment is not in what we did not have

but in what we have that does not meet our own needs.

Our greatest joy is found in living out our true vocation,

in being grateful for life and loving those whom God places before us, our joy is  
in days and nights of walking in the faith,  
    in the smile of a child,  
    the contented breathing of a beloved,  
    the satisfaction of a good day of work,  
    the sense of accomplishment of completing an assignment,  
    and being okay with knowing  
        that sometimes God begins a project through us,  
            one which we may never live to see the end  
                but we can find joy in knowing  
                    that we have been sent to play  
                        our part for the greater good  
                            of humankind.

And that is enough.

**It is enough to be sent.**

It is enough to be sent and to say, *“Lord, I am on my way.*

*I do not go alone, for my God and my Lord and my church are with me.*

*I will not go with a faint heart or faint praise.*

*I will rejoice with a full voice and spirit, and be joyful.”*

Thomas Merton sent a caller to leave the safety of phone booth,

to boldly walk into the streets and love those whom God sent to him.

Today Thomas Merton sends us out into God’s world with these words:

***“Be good, keep your feet dry,***

***your eyes open, your heart at peace,***

***and your soul in the joy of Christ.”***

*All power be to the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*