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“Not Me. Us.”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Advent, JOY Sunday, December 13, 2020
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; Matthew 11: 2-11

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; 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. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison what the Messiah^[a] was doing, he sent word by his^[b] disciples ³ and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ⁴ Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers^[c] are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? Someone^[d] dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet?^[e] Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written, ‘See, I am sending my

messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ ¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Footnotes:

- a. Matthew 11:2 Or *the Christ*
- b. Matthew 11:2 Other ancient authorities read *two of his*
- c. Matthew 11:5 The terms *leper* and *leprosy* can refer to several diseases
- d. Matthew 11:8 Or *Why then did you go out? To see someone*
- e. Matthew 11:9 Other ancient authorities read *Why then did you go out? To see a prophet?*

In someone’s backstory is their family memory
when they invited some folks to Christmas dinner at their home.
At dinner the mom turned to her 6-year-old daughter
and asked her to offer the blessing.

“I don’t know what to say,” she said.

“Just say what you hear Mommy say,” said her mother.

Everyone bowed their heads and the child started praying,

“Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?”

In Christianity Today,

Mark Donnelly tells a story about how his wife Amy gave him a great gift:

She gave him the gift of a chance to think over
who he is – and we are -- in Christ.

Mark and Amy’s daughter Kylie is like so many other pre-school children.

Kylie wants to be a princess.

She hears the fairy tales and sees how beautifully they are portrayed.

Kylie asked her mother Amy, *“Mommy, can I be a princess?”*

Now, some parents might have said, *“Maybe someday, when you’re older,”*

or *“To be a princess, you have to marry a prince,”*

Not Amy.

She knows who we are in Christ.

“Honey, when you believe in Jesus,” she said, *“you’re already a princess.”*

Those few words reduced a talkative four-year-old to contemplative silence.

She furrowed her brow.

She processed the response, it's deep meaning, it's hope.
Then, she went on to something else.

Somehow, in Kylie's young, inquisitive, bright mind,
what her mom said made all the sense in the world.
Of course, loving God makes her a princess!
It'd be crazy to think that God wouldn't crown her blessed soul.

What a wonderful Christmas gift to give to someone else! To give to yourself!
The gift of blessed assurance:
Through God-In-Christ we are loved, crowned, anointed, bless-ed royalty.
We are invited to love and follow the Messiah,
to revel with joy in His blessings and graces;
We are called to accept the cost of discipleship,
for the Crown we are to wear, there is the Cross we first must bear.
We cherish the gift of being anointed by the Holy Spirit,
water-washed and spirit-born into a life of love and service above self.

Recall the prophet Isaiah prophecy:
*"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone."
"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Creator, Prince of Peace." - Isaiah 9: 2, 6*

Filled with the joy and hope of God's love, Isaiah testified,
a testimony later adopted by Jesus of Nazareth
and countless followers of God over the millennium.

*"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.
They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD,
to display the Lord's glory.
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.
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.” -- Isaiah 61*

We share in this joy, this gladness in the Advent of God ,
the coming of Christ who shall distribute love and mercy to one and all,
Each of us responds and embodies the call in our own way, together.

Christians are complex, varied, as diverse as can be.
We are not uniform; one-size does not fit all;
there is nothing cookie-cutter about the Christian faith, about following God.
At the same time, contrary to popular narcissism,
it's not all about me.
The Advent of Christ is for all of us.

Last week I was working a chain saw and running my mouth,
simultaneously trimming Christmas trees
and greeting a couple thousand neighbors
who came by to support our tree & wreath sale, which was
fabulous.

One time while on the cutting table,
a friend from Decatur Maker Space,
who had helped us set up the tree lot and later helped take it down,
asked what I am preaching on Sunday.

*“What do you need to hear?” I asked.
“I need a sermon on ‘Not Me, Us.’”*

Sounds like the Gospel.
Not me.
Us.

One of the gifts of the Spirit is opening to us the gift of understanding,
which fosters and builds community.

The more we work and play at building community, at *Koinonia*, at fellowship,
the more we discover what we share in common.

The messages of the Spirit are given to the whole people of God.

*“The Spirit does not speak a different message for each spiritual seeker
– you find your truth and I'll find mine.*

*A quest for spiritual truth that would isolate us from our neighbors
is flawed at the outset.*

The miraculous gift of [the church] resides in our discovering our commonality.”

[New Proclamation, Pentecost, Page 77.]

Each of us is on our own journey,
communing with the Christ in me,
yet we seek and make ways to walk together,
communing with the Christ we see in thee.
We are a multifaceted, complex, beautiful body of Christ,

one that is also royalty,
sons and daughters of the Lord of Lords and King of Kings.
For to us has been given a Savior, a Mighty God,
a Prince of Peace, a Wonderful Counselor.

Honey, when you believe in Jesus, you're already a prince, a princess,
an ambassador for Christ,
an heir to the Throne,
a welcomed soul at the Great Banquet,
where there is always plenty to share,
and leftovers, besides.

Recently a new friend came here to worship.
After the service, she said, *"See, I always said there should be a God like that!"*

There should be a God like that.
One of our college students took a religion class,
and was required to visit a different church.
Afterward the student shared, *"All I heard there was hellfire and brimstone.
I missed the love we share here."*

Nice to hear.
To be honest, there's plenty of hellfire and brimstone preaching in the Bible.
In Matthew's Gospel, John enters in full of vim and vigor,
all fired up to get God's people
all fired up for the One Who Is To Come.

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,
"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."
This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,
"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"*

John the Baptist believed in a Messiah, in the One to Come,
One to fulfill God's Will.
John the Baptist had expectations, hopes, yearnings.
John stood foursquare in the midst of heartache and hopelessness,
and he dreamed of what the Messiah would be like,
what Christ would represent, re-present God to God's people.
Honey, when you believe the Messiah is coming,
you're ready for the Prince of Peace.

Matthew tells us:
*Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him...
and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism,*

*John said to them, "You brood of vipers!
Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?...
Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees;
every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit
is cut down and thrown into the fire.
... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor
and will gather his wheat into the granary;
but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

Now, that is an expectation.
John anticipates a Messiah who will set straight the corrupt and wicked.
Talk about fire and brimstone preaching!

Sometime later, as revealed in Matthew's Gospel,
Jesus is on the move across the countryside,
healing, teaching, raising from the dead, feeding the hungry,
welcoming home the marginalized, calling people to follow God.

Meanwhile, John has been imprisoned by Herod.

*"When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing,
he sent word by his disciples and said to him,
"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* – Matt 11: 2-3

"Matthew does not consider the asking of such questions
to close the door to faith."

[Boring and Craddock, The People's New Testament Commentary, p. 51.]

In other words,

it is fine and more than acceptable – it is expected! –
that John's question to Jesus be raised:

"Are you the One who is to come, or should we wait for another?"

John shared his question with his friends,
who relayed them to Jesus,
who took John's doubts seriously, gently, faithfully.

To ask whether Jesus is "the one who is to come,"
i.e., the one in whom God has definitely revealed Godself
and acted for the world's salvation,
is to ask what it is all about." [p. 51]

This season is a healthy time of year
for the raising of questions, like John did before us.

"To some extent, John's question may already be ours.
[John the Baptist] may speak for those [of us]
who were once sure of [our] faith

but now are not so sure..." [p.51]

Who here hasn't experienced your wondering and wandering soul
raise such a question, and more.

How many of us have had our doubts dominate the airwaves in our heads?

That is fine.

It's okay.

Like John the Baptist, it's okay when doubts dawn.

It's okay to question all you've heard or learned.

Personally, I would be more concerned if you never did!

*"Doubt is not the opposite of faith;
it is one element of faith." -- Paul Tillich*

To put this another way,

doubt is the ants in the pants of faith.

Advent is a season of preparation,

as well as introspection, confession, and regeneration of our souls.

Allow your soul's deepest wonderings, doubts, angst to come into the light,

and here we will ponder and share them, together, gently.

Ann Weems writes:

"Some of us walk into Advent

Tethered to our unresolved yesterdays

The pain still stabbing

The hurt still throbbing.

It's not that we don't know better;

It's just that we can't stand up anymore by ourselves.

On the way to Bethlehem,

Will you give us a hand?" [Kneeling in Bethlehem, P. 14]

John asked Jesus, "Are you the One who is to come, or should we wait for another?"

Jesus Christ responds gently, lovingly, honestly to John's question – and ours as well.

He realigns John's expectation of a Messiah, and maybe ours as well.

Jesus responded, "Go and tell John what you hear and see:

the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,

the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,

and the poor have good news brought to them.

And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Rather than looking for a God of vengeance and harsh judgment,

Jesus says, in effect, "What do you see? Feel? Experience? Think?

What do you know in your heart of hearts?"

Do you see my good deeds of compassion and mercy?"
God's good works testify that Emanuel has come, God-With-Us is here,
and He is loving, healing, helping,
saving and resurrecting folks every day,
ministering to the marginalized,
and blessing doubters and believers alike.

My Lord and my God.

I've been blind, and now I see.
I've been lost, and now am found.
I dove into addictions and the abyss, and Christ lifted me out.
I survived times of fog and fear, sorrows and shadows,
and thrive today with joy and jubilation.
I've loved and lost, lost loved ones, and lived with more loss than I care to remember.
Thrice I've stared death in the eye, and you better believe I blinked!
And thanks to the love of God in Jesus Christ,
experience hope and healing daily in the context of a Church
that dares to embody an attitude of Not Me. Us!
– We see the Christ in Thee --
here I stand, grateful, joy-filled, authentic, flawed, sincere,
reborn, renewed, resurrected.

Can I get a witness?

The Good News, my friends, is the Prince of Peace is found here, among the people;
a Mighty God is giving sight to the blind
and making the lame to walk;
a Wonderful Counselor is bringing liberation power
to the whole people of God.

We who are princes and princesses
are called to bear in us the Christ Child.

Ann Weems writes:

*"When the Holy Child is born into our hearts
There is a rain of stars
A rushing of angels
A blaze of candles
This God burst into our lives.*

Love is running through the streets."

[Kneeling in Bethlehem, P. 27]

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