

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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Debbie Manning
The Wonder of His Spirit | Isaiah 61**

Good morning everyone! It is good to be here today with all of you. My name is Debbie Manning and I'm one of the pastors on staff here. We are in the middle of our Advent series that we are calling "Wonder". And how are you guys enjoying the wonder of Advent? Just the peace, and those holy moments of sitting back and taking it all in...how's it going, because that isn't what it's like for me this year. I left my house this morning, and if you looked at our first floor, which is our living space, it is completely filled with everything from our upstairs. Clothes, beds, dressers...because we thought it was a really smart decision, the week before Thanksgiving, to have someone come into our house, drill holes in every ceiling, suck out all the insulation, re-caulk, and put it back in. So, when I was leaving and my husband said, "Hey, we really better get going on the Christmas decorations," I'm like, "I can't even find my underwear." So, I was thinking about this and sort of looking back on Advents of the past, and remembering those really tender, holy moments—these picture perfect moments—that actually rarely every happened, and I was thinking that most of our moments were moments like that. So we have this tradition in our family, the tree tradition, that we thought were these holy, marking moments of our family's lives, and it started out when our kids were really tiny. We would take them up to the North Shore, enter the National Forest, and we would haul those babies and toddlers in on sleds, because we thought it would be so special and holy and cool to cut our own tree down. And after lots of tears and frozen toes, we decided the next year, *let's go local*. So, we went nearby and we were going to have a special day and we went out to cut a tree, and that little girl who is actually sitting right there...she fell asleep on the way and she was so crabby and cried the whole way through that this was the best picture we could get (picture shown) and that was actually our Christmas card picture that year. Well, that didn't work so well, so then we decided the next year, *you know what? We're going to Bachman's, but it's going to be special because we're going to have pizza at Davanni's*. So we go to Bachman's and everyone is fighting because no one could agree on the same tree and we get it on the car and we're driving home and everyone is crying and fighting, and my husband pulls the car over and, in one of our very best parenting moments, we were just like *Stop it!! That's enough! We're going home. No Davanni's for you guys!* So then, going to the next year, my husband walked in

the door with two trees, and everybody started crying because they didn't get to help pick them out.

So, Advent isn't always what it's cracked up to be. And that's why I love that we can gather together here, and we can push the pause button, and we can sing together and pray and hear God's word, and remember what this is all about. About this Jesus, who came more than 2000 years ago and changed everything, and about a Jesus that's going to come again. And so it is a joy to be here with you all on this morning, pushing the pause button for myself, and I'm really enjoying that. I thought John Crosby did an awesome job last week of explaining why we are in the Old Testament during Advent, and why we are talking about the prophets. And he used three "Ps" to explain the prophets and where we were going, and the first "P" was predict. The prophets predict the future. They point the way to the coming Messiah. And then he used the word passionate. The prophets are passionate and part of what they do is try to grab our hearts, because that's what God is looking for—our hearts in this. And then the third "P" was prepare. The prophet's job is to prepare the people for the here and now. I love that John went through that for us. So, Carrie Gleeson started out the first week of Advent and she talked about the prophet Daniel...Daniel in the lion's den. And she talked about the importance of waiting on God, and that that waiting isn't a passive waiting, it's an active waiting and sometimes we have to step into that. And then last week John was in the book of Joel, and he talked about the first half of the book where Joel is warning the people *wake up, wake up!* And then the second half where you see this longing in Joel for a coming Messiah. And this idea that in our brokenness and in our pain, if we let God into that, that He can shine His love into the cracks of our broken hearts and how that changes everything.

And today we are in the book of Isaiah. We get to take a look at the prophet Isaiah, and just as a quick reminder, Isaiah contains 66 chapters. Many scholars cut it up into three sections—what they call the First Isaiah, chapters 1-39, when Isaiah is preaching to a people that are in Judah. It's about that 8th century prophet and his warnings to the people to come back, to quit walking away from God. And then chapters 40-55 are what they call the Exilic Isaiah, and here the prophet is preaching to a group of people that have lost their land. They are refugees; they don't have a home anymore. And then where we are landing today is what they call the Third Isaiah, the post-Exilic Isaiah. The people have returned to their land and Isaiah is now bringing them a word, a message of hope that there is something around the corner that they can put their hope in, because here is what's happened: the Israelites come back home and things aren't all that rosy, it's not like they left it. They are a discouraged and despairing people. They're down and out. They're depressed. And the Holy Spirit comes upon Isaiah and gives him this vision, a vision of hope, that points to a coming

Messiah. And this passage, what I think is so cool about it and how I think it ties to Advent, is that it relies on the faithfulness of God in the past that the people knew because God had promised them he would bring them home and He did, but it also lands in this place where they are putting their hope in a future that's being promised as well—and that's so much what Advent is like for us.

So, we are in Isaiah 61. We are looking at verses 1-4. You can follow along in the pew Bibles, and if you do the wording will be a little different because I am using an ESV translation—the English Standard Version. I always like it because our professor said it was a more literal translation.

¹ The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
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 grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.
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.

So, they're home, and restoration is slow. The Jerusalem as they knew it is no more, and all that remains for these returning people are ruins. What was is no longer. And these exiles return to walls and towns that are destroyed, and they are despairing. But here is what Isaiah offers them in this message, a message of hope to a shattered community: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me." So what we know right out of the gate is that God has commissioned Isaiah. He has anointed him for a special task. God has provided him His spirit. In the Hebrew: He has sent me. That is the main verb controlling all of the prophet's actions. And what it tells us is that God has commissioned this entire message that Isaiah speaks to the Israelites. "I've got

good news!” the poet and prophet is preaching. He is proclaiming, “I’ve got good news for the poor!” And what’s important here is that he is not just talking to the economically poor. This is about all of those that are powerless over their condition. And whether that condition is affliction or weakness, whether they are oppressed...this is speaking to all that kind of poverty. It’s both the spiritual and the physical; it speaks to the brokenness of the world of God’s people. Healing, liberation, proclamation—this is the message to God’s people, and poor and brokenhearted are words that describe the community of returned exiles, a community of people that are looking for a God in the midst of their pain and suffering. Psalm 147:3 says this:

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

I love that reminder. I love that peace in this scripture. That He has come. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

I was thinking about that yesterday. I was looking for a few pictures for my message, and I happened to find this box of Christmas cards that contains decades of family and friendships, and as I was looking through the cards, I was struck with the fact that we are the poor and brokenhearted that Isaiah is talking about, because our stories hold joy and sorrow and heartache and hopefulness. Because as I looked at the pictures, what I was remembering and reminded of is all of the lives over the years, the people in the pictures, and the stories of life and births and marriage, and loss—people who aren’t with us any longer. And there are stories of divorce, and broken relationships, and disease, and cancer, and healing. Of addiction, and depression. Stories of people wandering away from God, wandering back to God. And it hit me then: we are the wounded, hurting, broken people that are in need of a savior to come and bind our wounds. And that’s what the prophet points to. He points to a coming Messiah whose mission is to bind the wounds of the brokenhearted, and a Messiah whose mission is to those that are bound. That’s his message; Messiah is coming to bind the wounds and unbind the people. And the binding of the wounds and the freeing us from being bound to our sin is something that happens from the inside out. It’s transformative, and that’s the beauty of how our God works. And the real beauty of this message is not that all this pain and suffering, all this life, will come to pass, the real beauty of the message is that it’s about what God does with it. It’s what He makes of it; it’s what He makes of us.

Romans 8:28 says this: “And we know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”

I love that. There is so much hope in that. This past Tuesday night we had the Candlelight Memorial service here; I think we’ve been doing it for 29 years. We had 343 people in this candlelit room, coming to remember people that they have

loved and lost. Some of them had lost these people a few months ago, weeks ago...some years ago. But we gathered together in this room, and we were reminded of the hope we have in a coming Messiah, and at the same time we could stand together and hold each other as we shared our grief over our loss. And during about three songs, people come up and they light a candle in remembrance of their loved one. And during the last song, I was the very last person to go up, and I walked to this back wall and as I stood there, a woman came and stood next to me—it was just the two of us—and I looked over, and it was a person who has become a friend of mine. We got to know each other when at 36, she lost both a baby and her husband in the same year. And as we stood there, lighting the candles, we turned to each other and tears were streaming down our face. We put our arms around each other, and it was in that moment when we were in awe, in wonder, of what God had done—with not only the pain and suffering in the room that night, but in our own lives—because my friend now leads our Grief Recovery group. My friend is the one I call when anytime, as a pastor, I get a phone call from someone who has lost a spouse or a baby, and she'll go have a cup of coffee with them. That's the transformative work that our God does, and calls us to.

As we look at those Israelites, we can see that in the midst of their despair and their hopelessness, they were experiencing God's renewal. And as a result, they were called to be a witness to the world, a witness to God's graciousness, to God's love. And part of this passage—they shall build up the ancient ruins—calls these mourners to a new mission. And that mission was to rebuild community, to start life anew. Because the God of promise had fulfilled His promise and brought them back to their land. And as the prophet was speaking to this despairing group of people—a people who really weren't even quite sure if God really had made good on His promise—what they heard in the message from Isaiah was that God's promises continue, even when their present realities don't really feel like it. Because the promise was not one of nostalgia, or going back to the way it used to be. It was a promise that was built on God's faithfulness and covenant of the past, and a promise that moved them forward to the future promise and hope of a Messiah. And that's what Advent is about. It's active and transformative waiting. Our God tells us over and over again in scripture, "I will make an everlasting covenant with them." And for us, that's a covenant that comes to fruition in Jesus Christ.

In Luke 4, on the Sabbath, in Nazareth, Jesus walks into a temple, into the synagogue, and He stands up to read. They hand Him a scroll, and it was the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled it and He read. From Luke 4:18-21:

¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captive and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are

oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's big! He was naming it and claiming it, and He was using the words of Isaiah to describe His mission. To describe the mission of the church, to describe our mission.

This can be a crazy, stress inducing time of year, that's for sure. Oh yeah, this is often what it felt like, as you look at my husband, who is weary and tired, with all the craziness around him (picture shown). That is what it feels like at Advent sometimes. But I came upon this other picture (shown) that reminded me of the hope we have in Jesus. And it's not about the pants! What were those pants called? Zumbas? But this is what I love about the picture—I love the big, huge rips because it reminded me that we all have these gapping wounds in our lives, these gapping holes that Jesus comes and fills, and then calls us, despite our woundedness, to fill others with love and joy. And that picture reminded me of that because that little girl sitting on his lap had just had a morning where she had too much sugar and too many presents and had fallen apart, but her dad picked her up in his arms, and he held her and he brought her comfort, and he loved her...and it gave me a picture of who our God is and what He calls us to do, and I love that.

This is a season, for many, of joyful expectation, and for some it feels like painful exile. For others, somewhere in between. It's just a little crazy and busy, but here's the wonder of it all: God's faithfulness. He binds our wounds, He heals our souls, He forgives our sins. And the promise for Israel, and the promise for the church is Jesus Christ. And here's the beauty for us friends: He already came. He has come, and He will come again, and that is the essence of Advent.

Please pray with me.

Gracious and holy God, we come together as Yours, and we give You thanks. Thanks that we can look back and celebrate Your breaking into the world, and we can hold on to the hope of You coming again. Remind us that You came, and that You call us to be ministers of healing and justice and renewal. We pray Lord that all of the world might be filled up with Your love, and be glad for Your coming among us. We pray this in Your holy name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.