

Announcing Good News

Isaiah 61

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This morning, on the third Sunday in Advent, our sermon is about an announcement. This announcement is very important. Even though this announcement is very important, I confess to having a fear. My fear is that we don't listen so well to announcements. Maybe because we are inundated with announcements, announcements on television, on the radio, announcements that show up on social media, announcements that cry out for our attention on the billboards as we drive down the street, the endless stream of announcements tempts us to either block them out or ignore them. We strive as a church to present our announcements in a way that will call your attention to events and activities that we think are important. Nevertheless, it takes a lot of work to listen to announcements.

One of the most effective ways that churches make announcements that are memorable is by making mistakes. While people might not pay close attention to announcements about meeting schedules and dates for potluck suppers and special programs, if you put one mistake in a bulletin or newsletter, that catches people's attention. If you don't believe me, go on the internet and look up church bulletin bloopers. There are hundreds of otherwise mundane and often forgettable activities that churches have announced that have garnered more than their share of attention simply because the announcement included a mistake. Now I'm not sure all of these bloopers actually appeared in a bulletin, but just to get you in the habit of listening to announcements, see if you catch the humor, the irony, the mistakes in these bulletin bloopers.

- Low Self-Esteem Support Group will meet Thursday at 7 to 8:30p.m. Please use the back door.**
- The choir invites any member of the congregation who enjoys sinning to join the choir.**
- Ladies, don't forget the rummage sale. It is a good chance to get rid of those things not worth keeping around the house. Bring your husbands.**
- Don't let worry kill you off – let the church help.**
- Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on October 24 in the church. So ends a friendship that began in their school days.**
- The peacemaking meeting scheduled for today has been canceled due to a conflict.**
- The sermon this morning: Jesus Walks on the Water. The sermon tonight: Searching for Jesus.**
- The Rev. Merriwether spoke briefly, much to the delight of the audience.**

- During the absence of our pastor, we enjoyed the rare privilege of hearing a good sermon when J.F. Stubbs supplied our pulpit.
- The pastor will preach his farewell message, after which the choir will sing, “Break Forth Into Joy.”

This morning, I hope and pray that the announcement you are about to hear will be heard. I hope it will be heard not because you have been clued in that there might be a blooper. The announcement this morning has no play on words, no missing letter, no irony, and because it is the word of the Lord, there is no mistake. This announcement is pure Gospel. This is Good News. Because of that I ask you to listen with an open mind, with expectant ears, with a tender spirit, and with a receptive heart.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from the darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.” (Isaiah 61:1-3)

The prophet Isaiah, who spoke gentle words that God was in the business of comforting his people...the prophet Isaiah, who prayed that God would rend the heavens and come down...the prophet Isaiah who said God would come to us like a shepherd, gathering us in his arms and carrying us close to his heart...the prophet Isaiah, who said God would comfort us as a mother comforts her child...that same prophet, speaking for the same God, says one will come who is anointed by the Lord. This special one will stand before the people and say, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me...” Thus when they speak their announcement will reveal the will of God for this world. Thus when they speak their announcement will enact the will of God. As this Anointed One speaks and acts, the Kingdom of God will be revealed and will be enacted. The Kingdom of God will come with the Anointed One and through the Anointed One and in the Anointed One.

The Anointed One brings good news to the poor, to the brokenhearted, to the captives, to the prisoners, to those who mourn, and to those who grieve. Israel had been broken through the dark and devastating experience of the exile. They lost everything that meant something to them. They suffered physically, they suffered emotionally, they suffered financially, and they suffered spiritually. Now God sends the Anointed One to these very people who are broken. It is to these people the Anointed One makes an announcement. The Anointed One proclaims good news.

I tried to make light of the reality that many find it hard to listen to announcements. We are human. We get distracted. We are inundated with numerous announcements and so we zone out or filter out or check out. There is another reason people don't listen to announcements. That reason is found in the book of Exodus, the sixth chapter. Now if you know the Exodus story, how the people are delivered from Egypt, you know they often didn't listen to God's announcements. But in chapter six, their not listening is different. In Exodus six Moses brings good news to a people who have been beaten down and oppressed, treated as less than human, made expendable, valued not for who they were as persons but for what they could produce as slaves. They had experienced grief and loss and sadness and humiliation. In Exodus six Moses comes to these ones who mourned and grieved, and he shared with them the good news that God was going to take them to be his own people, to bring them out of Egypt and into the Promised land. What an amazing announcement for a down on their luck people. What Exodus six tells us is heartbreaking in its own right. "They did not listen to him because of their discouragement." (Exodus 6:9) Sometimes people are so crushed, so beaten down, so empty, so broken, they cannot hear the good news of God's announcement.

What happens in Exodus is that when the people cannot hear God, when God's word is not able to break through the sadness and despair, God comes down to be with his people. That is what God announced in Exodus 3. "I have seen the suffering of my people. I have heard their cries. I am concerned. So I have come down to help." Sometimes God comes down and makes himself known. After God comes down in Exodus, after the mighty of acts of God that are displayed in the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea and the manna in the wilderness and the water from the rock, the people are finally able to realize God is with them.

I wonder if there are some who heard the words in Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve..." I wonder if there are some who heard the words in Isaiah 61 and they just could not listen because of their discouragement. I wonder if there are some here among us, some alive in this world today, who cannot listen, who cannot hear the announcement, who cannot grasp the good news, because they are so discouraged.

The reason I said this particular announcement is so important, is that for those who could not listen, for those who cannot listen because of their disappointment, God doesn't leave his people stuck in disappointment. Just like in the Exodus, God comes down. And when God comes down in terms of these words from Isaiah, he is making true on the promise in the Gospel of John that the Word of God became

flesh and dwelt among us. With these words in Isaiah 61, God comes down and takes on human flesh. What I am saying is that when Jesus Christ, the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us, when Jesus made an announcement about himself, this is what he said...He said in the Gospel of Luke, in the sermon he preached that announced who he was and why he came, Jesus said these very words from the prophet Isaiah. He stood up in his hometown synagogue, took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and said to the people, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18, 19)

Jesus lets all the people who were suffering from discouragement, despair, brokenness, all who mourned and grieved and had lost hope, he lets them know he has come for them, to bring comfort, to bind up the brokenhearted, to provide for those who grieve. When I say he came down I mean the Word of God really did become flesh. He held the hand of the leper. He dried the tears of the weeping woman. He broke bread and passed fish to all those who hungered and thirsted. The Word of God really did become flesh. So much so that he took upon himself all that was broken, all the grief, all the mourning, all the sadness, all the pain of this world, he took it upon himself, in his flesh. Because he became flesh, we who might have found ourselves not even able to listen to his words because of the deep discouragement that has emptied our souls of hope, because he became flesh we are able to hear all of the announcements that were made about Jesus and know they are true.

We are able to hear the angels announcing to the shepherds, “I bring you good news of great joy for all the people. Today in the city of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah.”

We are able to hear God announcing at the waters of baptism, and on the Mount of Transfiguration, “This is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased.”

We are able to hear John the Baptist when he announces, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”

We are able to hear Jesus when he says, “I am...the bread of life; I am...the living water...I am the Way and the Truth and the Life...I am the resurrection and the life”

We are able to hear Jesus say, “Greater love has no one than this, that he would lay down his life for their friends.” We are able to hear Jesus say this and we then watch with a strange mixture of sadness and regret that is coupled with wonder and awe as he, the Son of God, the Beloved Son of God lays down his life for us on the cross.

Because Jesus Christ is the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us, we are able to hear the angels say at the tomb...at the empty tomb, “He is not here! He is risen from the dead.”

Today we have heard an announcement that is truly good news of great joy. We live in a world of discouragement. Sometimes we cannot hear the good news because we are so discouraged, so disappointed, so deep in our despair. But God doesn’t leave us there. He comes down. He even became flesh.

I read a story once about an announcement. It is a beautiful story about an announcement that spoke into despair and discouragement and disappointment. The beauty of the story is that the announcement was heard, in spite of all the sadness, the mourning, the crying, and the pain. “Ernest Hemingway is said to have told about a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son who had run away to Madrid. The father, longing for reconciliation, took out an ad in the largest newspaper. The ad read, PACO MEET ME HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA. Paco is a common name in Spain. When the father went to the square he found eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their father.”¹

I don’t anticipate 800 people responding to this sermon today about an announcement. But that isn’t the point, is it? What really matters is if you can hear this word, through the disappointment of life, through the heartbreak, through the despair, through the loneliness and through the loss...what really matters is if you can hear this announcement, if you can hear Jesus saying, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me to bring good news...” what really matters is if you can hear the good news, and come to Jesus. When you come to Jesus you come to God. You come to the God who is wrapped in human flesh. Come to Jesus and find comfort. Come to Jesus and find healing. Come to Jesus and find hope. Come to Jesus and find life.

¹ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace*, 37, 38.