

**Please take a sermon prior to the worship service only if necessary due to hearing impairment. After the service, sermons are available for any who wish to take one.**

“Garments of Salvation”  
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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Our Bible Study this week opened with the question, when does salvation happen? Actually, it wasn't as much of a question as a suggested activity. The idea was to put two signs on the wall with several feet apart. One sign would say, “Salvation means God’s deliverance here and now.” The other sign would say, “Salvation means life with God in heaven after we die.” And everyone was to stand by the sign that best matched their understanding of salvation, or, if more appropriate, somewhere in-between, wherever on the spectrum they consider themselves to be. For some people, salvation is exclusively about going to heaven when we die. For some people, the only salvation they are interested in is the here and now. I suspect most of us fall somewhere in between. In our scripture today, however, salvation refers to the here and now: God’s salvation of the exiles out of Babylon and the restoration of Jerusalem.

So here’s where we stand with Isaiah. What we know as the Book of Isaiah, was actually written in three different time periods by at least three different people. Today’s passage comes from the third section and was written in the time during or shortly after the fifty year Babylonian exile when the religious and political elite of Jerusalem, and therefore the religious and political elite of all Israel, were taken to Babylon. About fifty years later, when they were allowed to return to Jerusalem, they returned to a city in ruins. This is where our scripture takes us today. The passage begins with the voice of the Prophet, then God speaks, and the passage ends with the voice of Zion. “Zion” refers to the mountain near Jerusalem where Solomon’s Temple stood but throughout scripture “Zion” is used interchangeably with “the city of Jerusalem”

First the Prophet proclaims:

- <sup>1</sup> 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;
- <sup>2</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;

- to comfort all who mourn;
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</sup> 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.

Good news indeed. The Prophet declares that he is bringing good news to the oppressed, healing for the brokenhearted, liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners, comfort for all who mourn, on their heads will be garlands—that is, festive headdresses—instead of the ashes of mourning, that the ruins of Jerusalem will be built up and repaired. The Prophet’s declaration that he has been anointed “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” refers to the Jubilee year. In Leviticus, every fiftieth year was to be the Jubilee year, when all debts were forgiven, when any land sold to pay off debt was returned to the original owner, any indentured servants were released. And while many Biblical scholars think that the Jubilee probably never actually happened (we all know how excited the rich and powerful get about giving up their wealth and power) here it pretty much did happen. The exile had been almost exactly fifty years and now the exiles were being allowed to return to Jerusalem.

For fifty years they lived in a bustling, cosmopolitan Babylon only to come to Jerusalem, a devastated city in ruins. And think of it, over the course of fifty years, there’s a pretty significant generational overturn. Most of the people who left Jerusalem fifty years ago probably died in Babylon and most of the people returning had lived their entire lives in Babylon, or a most had been quite young when they left Jerusalem. So it must have been quite a shock “returning” to the devastation of Jerusalem and finding ruins instead of the glorious city they remembered or had heard about. But the Prophet gives the returnees encouragement by speaking of how they will raise up the ruins, repair the city, heal the devastations of many generations.

- Next we hear from God:
- <sup>8</sup> 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.
- <sup>9</sup> 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.

Here God directly sides with the oppressed, captives, prisoners and mourners saying, “I love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing.” God vows to make an everlasting covenant with them—which God does time and time again but since we repeatedly break the covenant, God continually renews it. And God says that their descendants will be known among the nations, that is, throughout the non-Jewish world; everyone will know how blessed they are. Recalling God’s covenant with Abraham, that the nations would be blessed through Abraham’s descendants, the implication is that God wants the nations to know how Jerusalem has been blessed so that the nations may have a share in God’s grace.

- Zion’s response, appropriately, is joy and praise saying:
- <sup>10</sup> 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.
- <sup>11</sup> 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.

Zion returns to the imagery of a thriving garden used by the Prophet. Like God, Zion also refers to the righteousness and praise to be shared with all the nations. Additionally, Zion’s proclamation of joy and praise uses imagery of wedding finery for both bride and groom. And I love these terms, “garments of salvation” and “robe of righteousness.”

I wonder what the garments of salvation look like? What is a robe of righteousness? Is this a robe of righteousness? Are our “Sunday best” our garments of salvation? I wish they were. I wish I could be assured of my righteousness by simply putting on this robe. I wish all the troubles in my life and all the pain and suffering throughout the world could disappear when I put on my nice church clothes each Sunday. But we know it’s not that easy. As one commentator explains,

“Transforming the ‘former devastations’ will require more than a memory of the past and a promise to build. It will require that the people of Jerusalem adopt, like God, a love of justice and a hatred of ‘robbery and wrongdoing’ (verse 8).

“A new future is possible because God promises to be in ‘everlasting covenant with them’ (verse 8) and because God has provided the appropriate work clothes: garments of salvation and robes of righteousness (verses 9-10). The city where hopelessness had taken root will, by God's spirit and by God's blessing, sprout righteousness and praise.”<sup>1</sup>

Yes, I think that's it. Garments of salvation and robes of righteousness are our work clothes provided by God.

So why are we reading this scripture during Advent? What does this have to do with the coming of Christ? Some of you may recall that in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' begins his public ministry by reading the beginning of this passage from Isaiah in his home synagogue. When he finished reading he declared, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus came to proclaim again, the year of the Lord's favor, the Jubilee. Emmanuel, God With Us, was born incarnate in human form to side, once and for all with the oppressed, with the marginalized, with the mourning, with the brokenhearted. And that's good news for us all, not only for the marginalized and brokenhearted, not only for those trying to re-build their lives from ruins, whether literal or metaphorical. Unfortunately, oppression, mourning, devastation and the myriad forms of pain and suffering known to the world were not put to an end once and for all in Isaiah's proclamation. Sadly, they continue today despite the life, death and resurrection of Christ. But Isaiah's proclamation is good news for us all because we are all given the opportunity to side with “the least of these” and in siding with them, we side with God. We all have the opportunity to work toward making *this year* the year of the Lord's favor. We have the opportunity to participate in salvation here and now. And in so doing, whatever we wear will indeed be garments of salvation and robes of righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Elna K. Solvang, “Commentary on First Reading Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11” Lectionary for December 11, 2011 <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?tab=1&alt=1>