

# SERMON

by Rev. Emily Chapman

December 11, 2011

*(Third Sunday in Advent, Year B - 2011)*

9:45 a.m. Service of Word and Table



## ST. PAUL'S

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**Lectionary Texts:** Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24; and 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; <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. <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.*

*<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.*

## **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>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.

In my sermon research this week I learned something I never knew before about something I have heard thousands of times. Around this time of year, it's easy to find a place to hear the words of Handel's *Messiah*. Its "Hallelujah Chorus" is one of the most recognized pieces of sacred music in the world. Handel was swimming in debt when he composed *Messiah*, struggling to hold on to a career spiraling out of control. Amazingly, he wrote the score in only 24 days. Its 1742 premier in Dublin was a benefit concert for a local debtors' prison. That first performance raised more than 400 pounds and freed 142 men from their debts. Throughout the rest of Handel's life he conducted *Messiah* in prisons and hospitals, to raise money to support orphanages and care for the sick, so much so that one newspaper reporter wrote, "The *Messiah* fed the hungry, it clothed the naked, it fostered the orphan, it gave hope to the hopeless." The *Messiah* is light, the *Messiah* is hope.

We are still waiting for the Messiah this Advent season, but this is a week of the Advent season where we remember the joy we have that we wait with hope. This time of year when we scurry about buying gifts for others, making our final chari-

table contributions, putting up our Christmas decorations, we somehow become more attuned to the world around us. During these long days of December the world around us can appear even more fragile than usual, more delicate, and more broken. Human service organizations report record numbers of volunteers and donations in the days leading up to Christmas. In some sense it is silly of course. The homeless are still homeless in July, the cold are colder come February, the elderly won't be any younger when March arrives, and the hospitals are filled with the sick every month of the year. But at Christmas we who are normally hard-edged become tender, and our hearts bleed more for the pain of others.

The past year has been a painful year. On-going wars; high unemployment; fires, floods, and earthquakes; increasing numbers of those living in poverty in the city of Houston. It has been a dark year, and yet every year is a dark year in its own way. Each year at this time we wait in the darkness, straining our eyes for the light to break through the darkness.

John the Baptist does not know what shape the hope will take. He only offers a word, an image, that hope will be light that will never go out. With the advantage of history we know more than John, we know what the light will be.

Madeline L'Engle tells a story about when her daughter was little, maybe three or four years old, and learning to sleep in her own room. The little girl would often wake up in the middle of the night and make her way through the dark house to her mother's bedroom, where she'd climb in bed and wrap her arms around her mom, terrified of the loneliness and darkness. One night, L'Engle, frustrated, offered some new counsel, trying to give her daughter confidence and teach her self-reliance.

"Honey, whenever you are scared, simply pray to God, God will protect you, God will always take care of you, God will be with you in the darkness."

The young girl looked into her mother's face, and said, "Mommy, that's fine, but I need a God with some skin on."

A God with some skin on. That's what we need.

John's hope is in the God of Israel, Isaiah's God, who has fulfilled his past promises, and who has promised to redeem the world, to bind up the broken-

hearted, to set the captives free, to bring liberty to the oppressed. John and Isaiah together are giving testimony to hope in the coming Messiah, the God we know will come to us in the flesh of a little baby, Jesus Christ, the God with skin on...God with hands that comfort and heal, with arms that embrace all people, with feet that bring Good News. Because our God comes to us with skin on, we never lose heart, we never give up hope, we trust that in spite of everything our God is with us.

I heard an interview on the radio a couple of years ago that featured a psychologist at a major research university. She said all the data showed the single biggest key to living a healthy life is staying optimistic.

“Optimists have less stress, better marriages, healthier diets and get more exercise, optimists generally believe things are getting better, humanity is improving, the world’s problems are being solved.”

And then, to clinch her point, she said, “We also discovered that optimists tend to live longer than other people!”

I suppose John the Baptist and Jesus were not optimists, both were dead before 33.

Christian hope is fundamentally different from optimism. Christian hope is a gift from God, rooted in the story of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Optimism is a story of what we desire to accomplish ourselves or our confidence in a vague generality that things will be better.

There is nothing wrong with being cheerful and positive, but Christian hope is distinctly different from cheerfulness or a positive attitude. Christian hope locks its steely eyes on the devastation of the world around it and readily acknowledges that life may not be too sunny. Christian hope does not bury its head in yuletide cheer and artificial lights, but like an Advent wreath glowing stronger and brighter each week, this hope pushes its way into the brokenness of the world, clearing a path in the wilderness so the true light might burst into the darkness.

The coming of God in the Christ-child at Bethlehem’s manger is not the sentimental vision of a Hallmark greeting card, but a revolution, an act through which God takes back what belongs to him. Christian hope is the conviction that God has

given us everything we need to take part in Isaiah's vision of justice, healing, and liberation, for ourselves and for others, the fullness of which is Jesus, the light of the world.

When Jesus begins his ministry in Nazareth, the first sermon he preaches in Luke's Gospel is a sermon on this Isaiah text: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has called me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind." And then he adds, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In other words, Jesus says, my life, my words, my actions, my salvation, I am the fullness of this promise. I am your hope.

Our hope came to the world in the midst of turmoil, in a country occupied by an oppressor. Our hope came into the world in a barn, born to young parents with few options in life, living in a poor community. Our hope came into the world, announced to shepherds cowering in fear with the words "Do not be afraid for I bring you good news of great joy for all people: that unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

And somewhere in the distant darkness came the sound of newborn baby's cry.