

The Voice

Isaiah 61:1-4

John 1:19-28

In honor of today's Christmas pageant, I present this homily, which will last about half as long as my usual sermon. So listen quick! And give thanks!

An anonymous man who lived about one hundred, sixty years later than the prophet Isaiah wrote the words we read today. This unknown man used the name of a famous man, an accepted practice in the ancient world. Using the known name gave this later prophet's words a bigger audience. We can call him a prophet, too, if for no other reason than the first two phrases we read. "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me..." He claims the Holy Spirit has communicated directly with him, and has set him apart ("...has *anointed* me"). And what message has the Spirit entrusted to him?

- to bring good tidings to the afflicted
- to bind up the brokenhearted
- to proclaim liberty to captives
- and all the rest

Approximately five hundred, sixty years later Jesus would echo this in his Sermon on the Mount. And indeed, his parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 uses many of these very words. He wants to teach his followers that God lifts up

the lowly, that the love of God, which can seem distant in this darkening world, is available even to the least among us. The prophet here uses them to address the people of God, who at the moment were facing a particular situation. Their long captivity in Babylon has just ended. Though a few stayed, most—perhaps, one scholar estimates, as many as 20,000 of them—walked hundreds of miles to return to what was left of Judah, their land, and its capital, Jerusalem. Now they faced the overwhelming task of rebuilding their cities' walls (for protection) and the temple in Jerusalem (for proper worship).

The prophet's oracle speaks of freedom for the captives, which of course connects directly to the people's departure from Babylon. He proclaims “the year of the Lord's favor”. This is a concept that goes back to the Exodus, when it referred to a coming time of peace and prosperity. It speaks of comfort, gladness, praise. It speaks of hope for the hopeless, “they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.” As the Chosen People stood looking at the vast scope of the work before them, the work of rebuilding not only structures, but also the fabric of their religion and even of their daily lives, they would need every last drop of encouragement they could wring from any possible source. The prophet's words covered them like a warm blanket.

One of our down-street neighbors has a Christmas display consisting of a wildly eclectic menagerie of blow-up characters. They have massive, lit up Grinches and dinosaurs. At daylight each morning, the pumps that keep those figures inflated turn

off, and they slowly sag and eventually slump forward onto the ground. It is a bit disconcerting to walk past Santa Claus lying prostrate on his face in a neighbor's yard! When the Chosen People returned home they must have felt deflated and even prostrated. Yet the Spirit of the Lord promised them they would once more stand erect, proud even, among the nations. And so they did.

Everyone faces reinflation projects. At times they feel every bit as daunting as what faced the Jews in 540 B.C. after they walked home from Babylon. The survivor of breast cancer. The family mourning the death of somebody who died out of turn, way too soon. The woman who lost her job after a corporate restructuring. The man who after a divorce finds his children do not necessarily want to stay connected. The church that shakes its head and wonders what happened when the cultural and spiritual currents that carried it along for a hundred years, and suddenly feels itself drowning. The lesson to draw from Isaiah 61 is that God still reigns. God's plan still pertains. As Americans living after more than 150 years of our world hegemony, as Christians living after lifetimes of ease, it can get oh, so tempting to wonder why we do not just automatically "win" all the time. The answer is that God's game differs from ours. We look at a secure retirement and a relatively painless demise as the goals of life. They are not. The goals of life are to rejoice in the ultimate realization of God's plans, and to accept our little parts in making them happen.

And those are sufficient. As we about to see with our own children.