

Welcome

Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Welcome guests and visitors – we are grateful you chose to come and worship with us during this season of Advent.

This week, we light another candle in our Advent wreath to signify the increasing presence of God’s Light in the world, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Sending with Blessing

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Go in peace and touch someone with love this week.

Message: Hope for the Broken-hearted

Nothing is impossible for God

“’Twas the day before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring - except for Margaret and her cat, Mittens. It was just the two of them this year. Margaret wasn’t sure what was worse - having a broken heart or her fear of becoming a lonely old cat lady.

Her soon-to-be ex-husband had just picked up their 9 and 12-year-old sons, Patrick and Michael, to spend Christmas Eve at his new condo, as agreed. ‘Mom, seriously, what’re you gonna do?’ Michael asked as his father beeped the car horn from the driveway. ‘You gonna be okay?’ ‘Who, me?’ Margaret asked, forcing a grin. ‘I have the whole day planned, kiddo!’

A big fat lie. Her plan was to eat a pint of rocky road and stay in bed all day. Margaret flopped on the couch, looking at last year’s Christmas photos. She was so blissfully unaware back then. How could she have predicted what was coming? The past six months felt like a tabloid news story. Her husband of 14 years casually asking for a divorce one morning at breakfast. Her begging him to stay. Trying to understand how a 48-year-old homemaker from Minnesota, who thought she’d built a white-picket-fence life, could end up in such a mess.

A cry from Mittens interrupted Margaret’s pity party. She found the cat rolled up on the kitchen floor, trying to get at something stuck to the back of her leg. A small card was stuck to her. Margaret pulled it loose and turned it over. *Merry Christmas, Margaret. My gift to you is Luke 1:37. Love, Ruth.*

Margaret rolled her eyes at her pastor’s latest attempt to get her to crack open the Bible. She’d snuck one into the mailbox in summer, with a sticky note saying, ‘Read me 15 minutes a day.’ Margaret had started attending Ruth’s church, not because she was much of a believer, but because it seemed like a good idea when the world was falling apart.

Ruth was persistent, Margaret had to give her that. But she didn’t know what Luke 1:37 was, and no way was she making the day even worse by puzzling over an ancient book that couldn’t possibly apply to her. She put the card back up on the fridge, right next to a photo of married

neighbors looking gorgeously happy in their matching sweaters. She looked down. It was 2:00 pm and she was still in flannel pj’s. Her son’s earlier question brought tears to her eyes. What *was* she going to do?

It was too much. Margaret wanted to run away from the empty house and all the unknowns. She threw on some clothes and escaped into the cold outside. Fifteen minutes into the walk, she was freezing. Finding herself on a street lined with boutiques, Margaret ducked inside the only open store.

It looked like a Christmas explosion inside. No corner had been spared from tinsel, mistletoe or ornaments. A saleslady emerged from a labyrinth of porcelain vases and ornate end tables. She wore a white wool pantsuit, red pumps and matching lipstick. ‘A young, hip Mrs. Claus,’ Margaret thought. She handed Margaret a glass of cider. ‘Welcome to my shop,’ she said. ‘What kinds of antiques do you like?’ ‘I guess anything with a good story,’ Margaret said. ‘Oh, then, you’ll love this.’ She reached down behind the register and pulled out a framed painting. ‘Just got it in this morning. Considered keeping it for myself!’

The woman went on about the artist, but Margaret wasn’t listening. Not a word. She was totally lost in the scene the painting depicted. Three boats dead in the water. No wind to carry them to shore. Stuck, just like her. Hopeless. But six words emblazoned in four-inch Gothic-style letters across the top of the painting made her heart skip a beat: *With God Nothing Shall Be Impossible*. ‘It’s from the Bible,’ the saleslady said. ‘Do you know it? From Luke. Chapter one, verse 37.’

The painting came home. Margaret dug out the Bible, stashed in the closet months earlier, and Mittens curled up next to her on the couch as she opened it up to Luke 1:37. Margaret began to read, letting the message sink in. As she did, she remembered her son’s question: ‘Mom, are you going to be okay?’ Yes. Yes, she was.”¹

God knows when we are broken-hearted and is already at work to deliver and save us, giving the only comfort and hope that makes sense in a fallen world. Margaret experienced God’s healing touch in a miraculous way, using a messenger, a cat and a saleslady. If God can

¹ <http://www.guidепosts.org/inspiration/mysterious-ways/a-merry-message-meant-for-her>

work through small things, can you imagine the hope we have in the miracle of our Messiah, the one sent to deliver and save us?

The first stop on our Advent journey was Isaiah 64:1-9. Isaiah appealed to God to help us when we are in conflict. We need God’s intervention because we rebel against God in every way, following our own ambition. We blame God for our faults and failures, lying to ourselves and making excuses when what we need to be doing is begging God to be merciful.

Our second stop was Isaiah 40:1-11. God hears us when we cry out in our suffering and gives comfort by sending a Messiah, one who will save us from our pain. The prophet cries out, inviting us to join the chorus of those who proclaim God to a world that is suffering and in pain. The good news of a Messiah is a lifeline to those drowning in an ocean of self-gratification, intolerance and sin.

Today, we make our third stop in Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. God’s Spirit anoints the prophet to bring us good news: God is sending us a Messiah to give hope to the oppressed and those who are mourning. Let’s take a look at this good news and see what it means for us today.

Isaiah wrote to a people who were broken hearted and mourning. After decades of slavery, separated from loved ones and forced to live according to the customs of another people, the people of Israel had returned home to a less-than-enthusiastic welcome. Like Margaret, their lives had been turned upside down, their plans disrupted and the future was unclear. As in Isaiah’s time, there are people today who are oppressed and in mourning, whose world has been turned upside down by the events of their lives.

God heard and responded, anointing the prophet to give a message of salvation and hope to the people then and to us today. Isaiah is Christ-like in this way, because the word Messiah means “one anointed by God” or “deliverer.” Isaiah brought word of the Messiah, giving hope to a people in despair. We know that because Isaiah’s words were recorded and have been read, remembered and kept intact for more than 3,000 years. This would only be possible if the Holy Spirit is at work and if the words carried an authority that goes beyond mortal power.

Jesus began his public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth by reading a portion of Isaiah 61:1-2, as recorded in Luke 4:16-21. Jesus identified himself with the one anointed by God. But the implication is greater, for Isaiah 61:1 begins, *“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.”* The presence of God was upon Jesus, for he is the true Messiah, sent to deliver us from bondage. The presence of God is on all who proclaim the good news of the Messiah, making them righteous.

What is the work of the Messiah? Reading through the passage, two key phrases speak to me. **First, the Messiah brings good news to the oppressed.** The good news is not just empty words, but a divine message of hope, hope which calls to us seeking a response. For some people, their response is to open a Bible, others go to a church, while still others reach out to a Christian friend. God works through those who follow Jesus to touch lives and give comfort. That’s why we are stronger in community, why our faith is not just personal but communal. We find God’s presence more easily and we are made holy when we are part of a community based on trust in God and one another.

God’s message of hope helps us when we are in oppressive situations. We are given three examples of those whom God acts to deliver: those who are broken hearted, those who are held captive and those who are in prison. God takes action: binding up our hearts so they heal and become whole, freeing us from those things that control and capture our minds, and releasing us from the confinement of our physical prisons. God’s actions may not be immediate and dramatic, but they are steady, persistent and irresistible.

God promises to act in a two-fold way, during a year of the Lord’s favor and a day of vengeance (v2). God will deliver justice to those who oppress, capture and imprison others for their own selfish gain, even if they are removed from doing the actual deed. At the same time, the Lord will free those who are enslaved and in debt, providing for all their needs for a year. God’s justice is swift while God’s mercy is gentle, giving those who are wounded time to heal and recover. God does not give up on us, even when we are the oppressors, waiting for us to turn back and receive grace through the Messiah.

Second, the Messiah gives comfort to those who mourn. There is a particular provision for those who mourn in Zion, but this morning I’m going to briefly look at how God comforts us when we mourn. The signs of mourning according to the customs of the ancient Middle East are wearing of sackcloth with ashes smeared on the head and body. Tears and a faint spirit are also signs of those who mourn. God acts to comfort us by sending a Messiah who takes away the source of our sadness. Rather than ashes, we will feel like dressing up, wearing special clothes and decorations. Our hearts will be glad, making us feel like we are warm and healthy. And rather than being afraid and uncertain, we will praise God and have an air of gratitude about us.

The problem is we often don’t see how to get from where we are – depressed, tearful and broken hearted, to the state where we feel festive, glad in our hearts and full of praise. We can’t see how an old book or stories of God will help us. Our spirit is weak, only faintly awake to God’s Spirit at these times. Our spirit is in distress.

“Sometimes our spiritual distress is centered on questions about God. Where is God? Why doesn't God help? At other times our spiritual distress is centered on questions about ourselves. What is wrong with me? How come I'm still struggling this much?

Doubts about ourselves can be profoundly troubling. We wonder if our faith will survive the struggle. We wonder if our faith is strong enough. Often we feel like spiritual failures. The kind of spirituality we have been taught does not envision 'good' Christians as people who wrestle with their thoughts and are sad everyday. We think of 'good' Christians as people who trust God and manage to smile in the midst of any circumstances. When we can't manage to do this, we question and criticize ourselves.

But wrestling with our thoughts and experiencing sorrow day after day is often a part of the healing process. It is not a sign of failure to engage in this hard work. It is a sign of courage. And it is a sign that our faith is alive and struggling. People of real faith struggle in life. People of real

faith are people who wrestle with thoughts and who feel sorrow in their heart.”²

And that’s where the strength of the Messiah lies, because Jesus knows our sorrow. Through his birth, life and death on a cross, Jesus experienced the full range of human emotions and experiences. He certainly knows pain. Jesus saw people at their worse and he healed their bodies, minds and spirits. Jesus experienced rejection by his own people, even his best friends. Yet Jesus loved us so much that he willingly went to a cross to die for us, to show he is the Messiah, the one anointed by God to deliver us. And, because God’s power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:10), Jesus gives us hope when our spirit is weak. All we have to do is respond by calling his name. Say it with me, “Jesus, have mercy on me.” God hears us and responds in love. That’s why God sent His Son to be the Light in the darkness and the hope of the world.

If you are broken hearted or know someone who is, be gentle with them. Most of all, spend quiet time with them, for God’s Spirit is present when we touch other’s lives in love. I pray you give the gift of God’s love to someone this Christmas.

Let us pray:

“Lord, I get so tired of thought-wrestling.

And I am so weary of heart-sorrow.

How long, Lord? How long does this wrestling and sorrow go on?

Help me, Lord, not to experience this struggle as spiritual failure.

Help me to see this hard work as drawing me closer to you.

Remind me today that you are with me in all of this.

Remind me today that you understand.

Remind me today that Jesus, the Messiah, loves me and comes to save me. Amen.”³

² <http://www.nacr.org/rooted-in-gods-love>

³ *Ibid*

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8-11 (NRSV)

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; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 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. 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. [...] 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. 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. 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. 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 (NRSV)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 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. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.