

## **Proclaiming and Restoring    Isaiah 61:1-4**

The prophet Isaiah of Chapter 61 is speaking words of comfort to a people about to return from exile in Babylon. For many, many years God's people have been far away from home, they have been unable to practice their faith fully with the Temple in ruins. This type of displacement was a common occurrence when an empire conquered another nation. The conquerors would weaken the infrastructure of the conquered nation by moving the leaders and the skilled workers to another place. Sometimes it was just a mass relocation. In this case, the conquering nation brought the Israelites back to Babylon to serve the empire and King Nebuchadnezzar. But when Cyrus the Great of Persia (or as we call it now Iran) overthrew the Babylonian empire, scholars tell us he respected the customs and religions of the lands he conquered and he issued two edicts of restoration sending the Israelites back to their land with money to rebuild. That is one reason Cyrus is called a Messiah - an anointed one, earlier in Isaiah 45 the only non-Jew to have that title in scripture. And so in our reading Isaiah begins to proclaim good news.

Proclamation is often a statement of truth that seems counter-intuitive or even impossible given the present circumstances – but this is what God asks Isaiah to do – declare that the broken people who had left their homeland and spend years in mourning, will be built up and restored again. And not only will they be restored, but all debts and failures will be forgiven. That is what is meant by the Year of God's Favor. Traditionally it is a culmination of seven sets of seven years - A Sabbath of Sabbaths when all debts are forgiven in Israel, ancestral lands returned to their original owner and the slate is wiped clean. God wants the people to know that they are getting a complete fresh start.

Proclamation is another role of the prophet – to declare a truth deeper than the present reality. One of the purposes of proclamation is to lift us up to be our very best selves. It is to help us resist both the cynicism of thinking there is nothing we can do, and the temptation to dwell totally on the negative – on the difficulties that need to be overcome.

I read a Melody Beattie book of daily meditations entitled, *The Language of Letting Go*. One of this week's readings struck me as being about proclaiming personally. It read, "One of our choices in recover is choosing what we want to think- using our mental energy positively. Positive mental energy, positive thinking, does not mean we think unrealistically or revert to

denial. If we don't like something, we respect our own opinion. If we spot a problem, we're honest about it. If something isn't working out, we accept reality. But we don't dwell on the negative parts of our experience. Whatever we give energy to, we empower." The reading goes on to talk about the importance of positive messages, positive affirmations where we remind ourselves of the deeper truths. This is what Isaiah has done as well. Did you notice his affirmations about the people returning: "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."

We notice Isaiah did not paint a rosy picture of an easy return to Israel. He used words like ruin and devastation, but he did not dwell there, but gave the people a vision to hold on to. A vision that would help them remember that God would help them, empower them to do this work of restoring. The work was hard, but imagine what it would have been like if Isaiah had said either – "no worries it will be a piece of cake" denying the truth or if Isaiah had been a doom and gloom prophet- "Ohhhh boy, you have a lot of work ahead – you won't feel like you are making headway for months even years...". No matter which of these extremes, denial of the truth or overly focused on the difficulties and barriers the people would have felt betrayed or undermined by Isaiah and God.

It is no wonder that this is one of the readings that Jesus uses to talk about his work in the world. Those who heard Jesus read this passage of Isaiah in the synagogue understood that he was proclaiming a truth that was not easy... in fact, a truth that given the circumstances seemed impossible. But Jesus declares this as his Mission Statement and says God will free the captive and heal the broken hearted and declare Jubilee – not through the current circumstances, but in spite of current circumstances.

As I thought about the role of proclamation in life two powerful examples were shown to me this week. With awareness that I am treading on political territory I want us to look at the words of Senator John McCain in response to the Report on Torture released this week. It seems to me that this is an example of what proclamation can look like. Here is a version I shortened a bit of his summary:

“... in the end, torture’s failure to serve its intended purpose isn’t the main reason to oppose its use. I have often said, and will always maintain, that this question isn’t about our enemies; it’s about us. It’s about who we were, who we are and who we aspire to be. It’s about how we represent ourselves to the world.

“When we fight to defend our security we fight also for an idea... that all men are endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights. How much safer the world would be if all nations believed the same. How much more dangerous it can become when we forget it ourselves even momentarily.

“Our enemies act without conscience. We must not..

“it is essential to our success in this war that we ask those who fight it for us to remember at all times that they are defending a sacred ideal of how nations should be governed and conduct their relations with others – even our enemies.

“Those of us who give them this duty are obliged by history, by our nation’s highest ideals and the many terrible sacrifices made to protect them, by our respect for human dignity to make clear we need not risk our national honor to prevail in this or any war. We need only remember in the worst of times, through the chaos and terror of war, when facing cruelty, suffering and loss, that we are always Americans, and different, stronger, and better than those who would destroy us.” Senator McCain is proclaiming: calling us to our best selves based on core truths. He does not deny the chaos and terror of our times,. But he also does not let us off the hook by suggesting that “realistically” our enemies use these techniques so we should too. He confidently and defiantly stated who we say we are supposed to be.

I witnessed more personal proclamations Friday evening while attending a Pre-Wedding Party for Deborah and Cindy. It shows that not all proclamation is in serious spoken word. First, I have to report that Marge Hooie and Joan Sheehan both cut a rug on the dance floor proclaiming their vitality. A poignant moment of proclamation came when Deborah and Cindy talked about their relationship, and Deborah sang two songs of Proclamation. She began by saying, “I know this is the first same-sex wedding event for many of you... us too. And so as

we were talking about songs to sing this one came to mind.” And then she sang the words to a well known Bonnie Raitt song - "Something To Talk About"

People are talkin', talkin' 'bout people,	I hear them whisper, you won't believe it.
They think we're lovers kept under cover,	I just ignore it but they keep sayin' we...
Laugh just a little too loud,	Stand just a little too close,
We stare just a little too long.	Maybe they're seein', somethin' we don't darlin'.
Let's give 'em somethin' to talk about	Let's give 'em somethin' to talk about
How about love?	I feel so foolish, I never noticed
You act so nervous, could you be fallin' for me?	It took the rumor to make me wonder,
Now I'm convinced that I'm goin' under.	Thinkin' 'bout you every day,
Dreamin' 'bout you every night.	I'm hopin' that you feel the same way,
Now that we know it, let's really show it darlin'.	Let's give 'em somethin' to talk about
A little mystery to figure out	Let's give 'em somethin' to talk about
How about love?	Listen to 'em baby
A little mystery won't hurt 'em	Let's give 'em somethin' to talk about
How about our love, love, love, love	Talk about love.....

And Deborah and the band followed that song with Jefferson Airplane's "Don't You Want Somebody to Love?" Both songs reminding us of the human need for love and connection, and both moving us to move beyond social convention or cultural biases to the reality of Love rooted in the Love of God for us.

What is God calling you to proclaim and restore this Advent season? What dreams and visions keep tugging at your heart? Perhaps they are unreasonable and unrealistic. Perhaps you have been trying so long it just seems futile. What about Faith UCC? What is holding us back from the deeper truth of God's love? What keeps us from following Jesus in bringing good news to the oppressed and broken-hearted, the captives and the indebted? There are plenty of reasons for us to just sit in the status quo and think we can't do anything. The world around will keep reinforcing that message and it is easy to acquiesce to inertia. But that is not the message of Advent and Christmas. Far from it! Jesus comes to proclaim the Year of God's favor, the time of forgiveness and healing and justice and peace. Oh, the world may not reflect it... but these are the truths that we proclaim. Rejoice, rejoice "God is With Us" Emmanuel will come to us and abide with us. AMEN