

“Testifying to the Light”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 I Thess. 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28

It is more than twenty years ago now, sub-Saharan Africa was experiencing one of its many devastating draughts and accompanying famines. Bob Geldorf organized a rock concert for famine relief. Phil Collins sang “*Do They Know It’s Christmastime At All.*” The words went like this:

*At Christmastime it’s hard,
But when you’re having fun
There’s a world outside your window,
And it’s a world of dread and fear
Where the only water flowing
Is the bitter sting of tears
And the Christmas bells that ring there
Are the clanging chimes of doom.”*

Advent for all its emphasis on light shining in the darkness can not quite make us forget that the world is indeed full of darkness. Perhaps this is why the season of glad tidings and good cheer also includes Salvation Army Kettles, toys for tots programs for the poor, special food drives and dinners for the hungry, winter coat drives for the “naked,” charity drives for the poor, and attempts of all kinds to reach out to the widows, the aged and the lonely.

In a little over a week the longest and darkest day of the year will arrive. This is an apt metaphor for where the world constantly finds itself. Perhaps this is one reason that the church in wisdom chose to celebrate the birth of Christ at this time. **“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was**

coming into the world.” At Christmas, which celebrates the birth of Christ, we find the days lengthening, the light grows stronger and lasts longer. The light begins to push the darkness back.

Christians are not “cockeyed optimists” who blindly proclaim that the world is getting better and better, with or without God’s help! Indeed the Bible quite clearly predicts that the powers of darkness will hold their own and perhaps even intensify before the Kingdom of God comes in its fullness. Christian hope looks this reality fully in the face. Christian hope sees the world with all its darkness. Christian hope lights a candle of faith and love, rather than give in to the darkness or simply curse the darkness and die. Christian hope works to bring light where ever it can in this dark world in which we live. At times this means working for justice in an unjust world. At times it means working for healing in a world filled with pain and hurt of all kinds: physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological, or sociological. As Christians we do so in the belief that to do so is to testify to the light.

So it is that Isaiah 61 begins, **“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; God 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,”**

The prophet of God is speaking to poor and oppressed of Israel. They have returned from captivity in Babylon to Jerusalem. The city is a shambles. The temple which was the center of their religious and cultural life is in ruins. The city walls which would protect them from their enemies is a pile of rubble. The economy has collapsed. The handful of wealthy people have gobbled up the property of the poor, most likely at fire sale prices. Given all of this the big question was “How will the city be rebuilt?”

“What will the city look like when rebuilt?” “What will the socio-economic system look like?”

These don't sound like religious questions but this passage from Isaiah makes it clear that the good news of the gospel here is about the nitty-gritty of life. How much does food cost and can all eat well? Is there decent affordable housing? Can a sharecrop farmer own his own land again? Can those who have run up massive debts, just to stay alive, have their debts forgiven and make a new start? As Walter Brueggemann puts it, **“It is the work of this speaker, driven by God's Spirit and anointed by God's authority, to ‘gospel’ these defeated folk back to power and constructive action.”** The poor and oppressed are in need of a vision of a just society and of empowerment to overcome their resignation that the status quo is the only way the world ever will be.

Isaiah makes it clear what God's desires on such matters are, **“For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; . . . I will make an everlasting covenant with them.”** When I was in seminary liberation theology was sweeping theological circles. It arose from theologians who were primarily from Central and South America. There, surrounded by poverty and oppression of the poor, they came to the conclusion from their reading of the Bible, that God has a **“preferential option for the poor.”** This doesn't mean that God hates those of us who are middle class or wealthy. It simply means that God has a **special concern** for the poor and the oppressed.

To address such issues the ancient prophet felt that God was lifting up the ancient idea of the Year of Jubilee from the Torah. You can read more about this in Leviticus 25 or Jeremiah 34. The Year of Jubilee was to come around every 50 years. At this time families who had been forced through

the years to sell their land to keep body and soul together would get their land back! Those who had built up huge debts to put food on the table would have their debts canceled! Imagine that! The goal was to make sure that the people of God did NOT develop a permanent underclass. This ancient religious tradition understood that wealth and the power that comes from it, tends to keep pulling more and more wealth and power to it, often at the expense of the poor and oppressed. It recognized that wealth and privilege rarely of its own accord gives up its power, so the Year of Jubilee called for a resetting of the social order every 50 years. What a remarkable vision!

Early in the 20th century the Methodist Church and later the newly begun Federal Council of Churches, that would become the National Council of Churches, developed “the Social Creed for Churches.” This creed was developed in 1908, almost one hundred years ago. I am struck by how relevant this vision is today:

We deem it the duty of all Christian people to concern themselves directly with certain practical industrial problems. To us it seems that the churches must stand:

- **For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.**
- **For the right of all men to the opportunity for self-maintenance, a right ever to be wisely and strongly safeguarded against encroachments of every kind.**
- **For the right of workers to some protection against the hardships often resulting from the swift crises of industrial change.**
- **For the principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.**

- **For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational disease, injuries and mortality.**
- **For the abolition of child labor.**
- **For such regulation of the conditions of toil for women as shall safeguard the physical and moral health of the community.**
- **For the suppression of the “sweating system.”**
- **For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor to the lowest practical point, and for that degree of leisure for all which is a condition of the highest human life.**
- **For a release from employment one day in seven.**
- **For a living wage as a minimum in every industry, and for the highest wage that each industry can afford.**
- **For the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised.**
- **For suitable provision for the old age of the workers and for those incapacitated by injury.**
- **For the abatement of poverty.**

To the toilers of America and to those who by organized effort are seeking to lift the crushing burdens of the poor, and to reduce the hardships and uphold the dignity of labor, this Council sends the greeting of human brotherhood and the pledge of sympathy and of help in a cause which belongs to all who follow Christ.

I can hear echoes of the prophet Isaiah here and if Isaiah is to be believed, echoes of God cheering such sentiments on! **“For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing!”**

No wonder the poor and oppressed are filled with rejoicing! **“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for God has clothed me in the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness. . . .”** Indeed the prophet foretells that not only will the poor and oppressed of Israel rejoice but that the whole world will rejoice, **“...so the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.”** The ancient prophet believes that Israel could become a city on a hill, a light to the nations, and a model of the kingdom principles!

Dr. John Thomas told a story about one of our United Church of Christ churches, our largest in fact, Trinity UCC in Chicago. John Thomas was there for worship one Sunday. The service had already started when a man shuffled in at the back, causing a bit of a stir. When the pastor, Jeremiah Wright saw him, he invited him forward. He said, “I’m a little unsteady because I haven’t walked very far without shackles.”

The governor of Illinois had commuted several death sentences and pardoned some on death row, who had been wrongly accused. This man was one of them. He looked around the sanctuary and pointed to various people that he wanted to thank. One was a retired judge to whom he had written about his case. This judge was the only one who took his case seriously and did something about it. He pointed to the pastor who visited him in prison. Finally he pointed to a beautiful woman who was a journalist. He said she was high on the prisoner’s lists “but not always for the right reasons” but he wanted to thank her for hearing him tell his story and publishing it in the paper.

Thomas calls Trinity UCC a “go to church.” It is the kind of church that people can “go to” when there is a need in the community. It is the kind of

church that has laid the ground work for the long hard slog of working for justice. It is a “go to church” that carries the light of Christ, like an Olympic flame passed hand to hand, until all the world can be caught up in the spirit of God’s justice.

It is important to remember that Christ himself chose to use Isaiah 61 as his self definition of why he came and what his message was. Let us follow Christ’s example in this. In doing so, we as individual Christians and as a church will be like John the Baptist, testifying to the light, **“The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”** We will become as one **“...crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’”** Amen.