

**“Seeing, Believing and Acting Upon God’s Future”
based on Isaiah 61:1-11, David Jahnke, 12/11/11**

I want to start today with the context of Isaiah’s proclamation of good tidings. The Israelites were back from exile in Babylon but they had returned to a wasteland. Isaiah speaks of ancient ruins and cities that have been devastated for generations. After 50 years of exile, the people had initially celebrated their deliverance from Babylon but then came home to another form of captivity. It was to this situation that Isaiah was sent to speak of a better future that would transform the present with hope, if the people believed and acted upon Isaiah’s beautiful vision.

A colleague was telling me about an encounter with her parishioner this week who had come to America from Haiti. She had heard stories of this parishioner sometimes looking so sad. So as my colleague was talking to her one day about church business, she took advantage of the opportunity to inquire. The parishioner broke down and spoke of how her American husband (who was also a smiling hypocritical church member) emotionally abused her, telling her that she was stupid and worthless; that she owed him everything; that he was like a god who had saved her and she was his slave.

She said this was exactly how she felt, because she had no education, no way to provide for herself and therefore, she had no idea what she could do. She feared him becoming physically violent, which was in his past, if she started to put up resistance.

Like Israel, she had been delivered from the oppression of poverty in Haiti only to come to America to find a new form of captivity. My colleague responded first with compassion, and then with the insistence that she was not a slave; that she was free in Christ and that she had many around her who loved her and could help free her. She suggested ways for her to be liberated, including scholarships to universities and new homes for women in her situation. May God give her strength to act upon these new possibilities.

When good tidings are heard, believed, and acted upon, then the vision begins to become reality. Isaiah reminded the Israelites that they had been freed from the darkness of captivity. And while things were not perfect, this was their homeland, to which God had returned them. And God had plans to rebuild the ruined places.

For my colleague’s parishioner, she needed a reminder that God had her in America and at this church for a reason and that a new future was ahead! And with the help of community, she could rebuild her life. In both cases, it was time for individuals and communities to enact the good news which had been proclaimed. And this meant becoming priests of the Lord and ministers of God’s healing, to each other and especially to the broken-hearted and imprisoned.

I have been reading an excellent book called The Hole in Our Gospel by Richard Stearns, the CEO of World Vision, a Christian relief organization. He is writing about the importance of not just believing the gospel but enacting it. Stearns writes of a perfect example of this.

I don't think I've ever been to a place as spiritually dark as Gulu, in northern Uganda. Gulu is the epicenter of more than twenty years of violent atrocities committed by the so-called Lord's Resistance Army and its leader, Joseph Kony, a monster who has declared himself to be the son of God. If Satan is alive and manifesting himself in our world, he is surely present in this cultish and brutal group whose trademark is the kidnapping of children who are subsequently forced at gunpoint to [do terrible things which I will not mention here...] During his reign of terror... Kony has kidnapped more than thirty-eight thousand children and turned them into child soldiers. It was in this unlikely backdrop that I witnessed the awesome power of the gospel that has become so tame to us in America.

For more than a decade, World Vision's Children of War Center has worked to rehabilitate and restore the children who are rescued or manage to escape from the LRA rebels. These are children with unimaginable psychological wounds; kids who are typically feared as monsters and rejected by the very communities they once came from because of what they have been forced to do. Intense spiritual and emotional counseling, forgiveness and reconciliation, and even job skills training have been provided to thousands of these damaged children.

[There were] two boys—LRA soldiers-- entering the compound [the day I was there. They] too, had been forced to kill and maim. Their eyes were hollow and vacant-eyes that had seen unspeakable things...I could see no life in them...[Their names were] Michael and Joseph. Michael's left arm was withered, the result of a gunshot wound sustained before he was fully grown... They [had been] told that if they were taken to [our] Children of War Center, they would be poisoned or worse. That is [also] why these boys were terrified that day, stepping out of the car.

The forty other "children of war"- damaged souls all- surrounded them and began singing and clapping joyfully. These songs of praise to God, anthems of healing and forgiveness, were more beautiful than any choir of angels. Michael and Joseph were dumbstruck at this welcome, so different from what they had expected. They began to see faces they knew, other kids who had escaped... Some spark of light began to return to their hollow eyes. Hesitant smiles slowly turned up the corners of their mouths, as high fives and hugs were offered by this one and that.

Soon all fifty of us poured into the makeshift chapel of corrugated tin and rough wooden benches in the compound. A spontaneous worship service erupted as the songs of God's healing, forgiveness and power were sung over and over again.

“Welcome home, welcome home, Michael and Joseph. You are home now.” The good news- the glorious, life-transforming gospel- washed over Michael and Joseph, and in the moment, the unthinkable possibility of forgiveness broke over them like a new dawn. They could be forgiven, restored, made whole again. This was almost impossible to believe, the “glad tidings” so overwhelmingly good.

A couple of days later...I was asked to preach ...on Easter Sunday... and I decided to speak on the Prodigal Son; of the Father embracing the estranged boy, forgiving every transgression unconditionally, celebrating the lost son being found—and restoring him to his place at home...welcoming him home. As I preached, I watched Michael and Joseph, now just two more faces in the choir, as they listened to the message with new hope in their eyes and fervent prayers on their lips. [The Hole in Our Gospel, pp. 61-63, Richard Stearns]

Like the Israelites, Michael and Joseph were home and yet they had a long way to go. The new community which had embraced them would have to become a new family to them, helping them in the long-term to re-build their lives; reminding them again and again of God’s forgiveness and God’s plan for their lives.

We have many in our own community who are in need of priestly attention over this holiday season. And just as Isaiah was anointed with the Spirit, so have you been. So you might ask yourself, “To whom is God sending me? Among the lonely or broken in Spirit that you know, who are you going to reach out to with your presence and kind, hopeful words? Among the grieving for the first or second or third Christmas this season, who might you comfort with a phone call or visit? Are there any foreigners working our fields and buildings and neighborhoods who could use a Christmas greeting, a “feliz navidad” and a smile of encouragement?

I had another colleague whom I ministered to this week. He spoke on Thursday about a legal situation related to his father’s trust. He had been designated the trustee until three weeks before his father’s death when a lawyer his brother knew befriended his father and deceived him, saying that my colleague was out to steal his money. So he made the lawyer his trustee.

Now not only did my friend have power of attorney, he also had two letters from doctors saying that his father was unable to make sound decisions toward the end of his life. Despite this, the court ruled against my colleague on a technicality. And yet he hoped in the appeal process...But again, he learned that he had lost his appeal as well. The injustice is mind-boggling to me. He mentioned something, however, that struck me. He had been talking to his sister, who was very troubled by all of the family strife. And after acknowledging the seriousness of the situation to her, he told her of some situations at his church which made their difficulties seem rather pale. So he asked her to keep perspective on the matter.

So I want to conclude by talking a little but about perspective. Because as the powers of injustice and unrighteousness and darkness continue to plague us, even as we embody the good news, we need transcendent perspective.

When I meet on Thursday morning with the prayer group, we read the lectionary passage a couple of times, and then allow the Spirit to bring a word or phrase to mind. Last Thursday, nothing was coming to mind for me. I think I was troubled by the news from my friend,. So I just blurted out “everlasting covenant.” The other prayer partner said the same phrase which was curious but occasionally happens. But then she went home to her homework from another Bible study which happened to mention God’s everlasting covenant. She e-mailed me about this, wondering what God was wanting to say to us.

I think God is wanting to shine eternal perspective on everything. Through Isaiah, God wanted to let the Israelites know of a future day in which all of their present hardships would be gone. A day when their cities would be rebuilt and their land would provide for all their needs. A day when all the nations would know how much the God of Israel had blessed his people who would be priests to each other and the world. A day when everlasting joy would be theirs.

And note that it was this passage which was read by Jesus in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry. And when he finished reading it, he told the congregation, “Today in your hearing, this scripture is fulfilled.” And indeed, through every powerful thing he said and did, people were delivered from captivity and provided signs of God’s eternal Kingdom. So we have every reason to believe that that promised day is ahead.

Advent is all about that future day; and while it is to come...it can also enter into the present. As we see, believe in and act upon that coming day, hope transforms our community and our lives into the microcosm of the Kingdom of heaven that God wants for us. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. Very good things are ahead...as we see and hear with eyes and ears open to the Spirit, as we believe with an open mind and as we act with the strength and the joy of the Lord. So to the God of all grace who calls us eternal union with the risen and coming Messiah...be all the power and the glory, now and forevermore. And God’s people say...

