

What A Friend We Have In Jesus

Bible Reading:

Isaiah 61: 1-3

Matthew 11: 25-30

Revelation 7: 9-17

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The prophet Isaiah writes in ch.61 -

1 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;

2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

3 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.

Isaiah speaks of people whose lives are pressed down and buckling under;
people whose existence seemed locked into a prison of sorts
people whose hearts had been broken
people who felt as though everything was turned against them.
people who could only see the world in the blacks and greys of despair.

Can you relate?

Dumb question, isn't it.

So many of us can relate all too well.

The prophet gives hope; he foretells of a coming day which will replace the ashen grey looks & dark swollen eyes with beauty;

gladness instead of mourning,
praise instead of a faint spirit.

The prophet proclaims the switch of beauty for ashes. The ancient Hebrew words for "beauty" and for "ashes" are virtually the same. They have exactly the same letters. The only difference is that two of the letters are reversed in order.

And in reversing the order they stand the meaning of the word on its head.

Isaiah prophesies that there is going to be a switch in the order of life - someone is coming who will stand things, as they presently are, on their head.

Says Isaiah - there will come the oil of gladness instead of mourning. Think of this oil as a cologne. It was used at celebrations in the Ancient World. Splash on the scent. Throw open the curtains, turn on the lights, crank up the music, dance a holy jig to celebrate great things occurring.

And put on your party clothes - a garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; or as another translation puts it, a spirit of despair.

Desperate hopelessness and sadness, a despair about any meaning -- that's going to be reversed, just like those Hebrew letters.

One is coming who will bring you from hard, gritty dirty survival to joyful, light, carefree living.

In Isaiah 61 the prophet says he has been anointed to "bring" good news. The word used there was one used to describe someone who has come back from the heat of battle with news of victory.

Ah, yes - There's been a great battle.

But good news - there's **also** been victory.

Proclaim the results -

the brokenhearted will be healed,
the poor will be made rich,
those in captivity will be set free.

It's the year of the Lord's favour.

Friends, for many - no, most - of us these last months have been quite a rough ride. We have been experiencing life as a battle - a hard battle.

For some of us through this past year we've faced the enemy of death.

For others it is illness, persistent and debilitating illness.

For some the work scene has been very difficult.

For some the loss of innocence in our congregation last Fall as the abuse charges came forward - that was an area of deep pain, of battle.

Over this last year some have talked to me of the pains endured through miscarriage

A few of you are battling deep regret over past activities and actions. Like a portion of your life has been lost.

Some of your homes have been deeply shaken.

Some of you had hopes and dreams that have been harshly shattered.

Loss seems to be everywhere.

Pain and broken hearts are scattered throughout this congregation.

And we could try to cope by ignoring it and bravely soldiering on.

We could turn into robots and turn all our feelings off, or deny them.

We could submerge our pain under a thick blanket of hyperactivity.

We could drink too much.

We could go on spending binges.

But these, we know

deep down we know

these are not helpful ways to deal with loss and pain.

In fact, they can be downright destructive.

We need another way out.

So we hear the news of Isaiah 61 and hope.

We **long** for the coming of One who can make these promises into reality.

Brothers and sisters,

When we long like that, we are longing for Jesus.

The One of whom Isaiah prophesied.

Jesus, our Saviour,

who spoke these tender words in Matthew 11:

25 "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;

26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.

27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Jesus issues a tender invitation to come.

It's an invitation issued not to those who pretend they can hold it all together and figure it all out, and sort life into all the appropriate categories.

Rather, Jesus issues the invitation to people who come as simple folk, as children.

Tell me, what's one of the biggest, most persistent, repeated questions to come out of a child's mouth?

Why?

They don't know. Wish they did. But they don't.

So they ask, **Why?**

Jesus calls to Himself people caught in life situations they don't understand and can't control, and face with the great question, "Why?"

Jesus calls people who are simple and child-like.

Children –

When they skin their knee;

When they're hungry or thirsty;

When they're feeling scared –

Little children go running for their parents.

To people who come in such simple, expecting ways comes the invitation -

Come.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Stop pretending you can carry it alone.

Stop even trying.

Don't try to rationalize it all away.

Just come to Jesus.

Don't be afraid to raise your hands and ask, "Why?"

Bring your needs, your frustrations, your shattered hopes, your fears

- all that which burdens you.

Bring it all to Jesus.

Bring it to the One who has taken on himself the heaviest of burdens -

- the sins of the world

And carried them, as a burdened prisoner, to the cross.

Bring it to the One who was weighed down from that cross into the grave.

A prisoner of death.

Bring it to the One who rose from death as Lord of Life;

Christ the Victorious One; the Victor spoken of in Isaiah 61.

Bring all your burdens,

your losses, your pain, your grief, your regret

bring it all to Jesus.

He promises you a yoke.

He promises you a light burden.

Know what a yoke is?

A fitted board going around the neck and over the shoulder to help you carry large loads. When the yoke fits right, and the burden is placed on that yoke, it becomes much easier to carry. It feels much lighter. More manageable.

A person can carry two buckets of water on a yoke far easier than without one.

Sometimes in the ancient world yokes were fitted on oxen - two at a time. Beside each other. They would pull together. And the joint pulling would make the load seem smaller than if one of them had to pull alone.

Jesus promises you a yoke.
The yoke is known as prayer.

The old hymn, which we'll be singing in just a moment, says,
What a friend we have in Jesus.
All our sins and griefs to bear.
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer.
O what peace we often forfeit
O what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer.

Sometimes, perhaps too often, we try to live our lives without the yoke.
Take it up, friends.
And know what happens when we do?

Jesus is going to climb into that yoke beside us.
We don't have to carry the burden in our life alone.
He pulls for us.
And the load will seem far lighter.

As the old proverb put it, "*a burden shared is half a burden.*"

And besides that -

Sometimes....
Sometimes through the miracle of prayer
In ways and times that are understood only by our Sovereign God
Ways and times that we can't control or manipulate;
Sometimes our Great Lord grants miracles which lighten the load.
 Illnesses are healed.
 Jobs suddenly turn up or raises happen.
 Inner strength appears to deal with grief.
 An addiction loses its grip.
 Bitterness begins to melt, and forgiveness becomes possible.
 A person appears at precisely the right moment,
 saying precisely the right thing.
Yes, sometimes our Great Lord grants miracles which lighten the load.

Oh, burdens don't always disappear.
Bad things still happen to relatively good people.

But these dark events lose their power to crush and destroy us.
Chaos and fate do not have a death grip on us.

Rather we can move forward into life under the loving care and companionship of the One who has been anointed
to renew creation and to renew our lives.

the One who will
 one day
 make all things new.

The One before whom some very dear people
 people that were part of our lives up until quite recently

people who have died
are now living in peace.

The Bible gives us this glimpse -

- a glimpse beyond the 3-D space that we call Creation into the other dimension of reality known as eternity and heaven.

- it is a glimpse at the first taste of that life promised in Isaiah 61.

the life of beauty
garlands
gladness
and praise.

Hear it with me.

9 After these things I saw a great army of people more than might be numbered, out of every nation and of all tribes and peoples and languages, taking their places before the heavenly throne and before the Lamb, dressed in white robes, and with branches in their hands,

10 Saying with a loud voice, "Salvation to our God who is seated on the high seat, and to the Lamb..."
...[One of the rulers in heaven] said to me, "These are they who came through the great testing, and their robes have been washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.

15 "This is why they are before the heavenly throne of God; and they are his servants day and night in his house: and he who is seated on the throne will protect them.

16 "They will never again be hungry, they will never again be thirsty; and they will never again be troubled by the burning heat of the sun:

17 "For the Lamb who is on the heavenly throne will be their keeper and their guide to fountains of living water: and God will wipe away every tear from their eye, for ever."

[Revelation 7]

That's waiting for us.

That's what's being experienced by the loved ones we have laid to rest in faith.

And with the courage and promise of that future,

we can leave dread behind

and - perhaps with tears still in our eyes -

we can move forward, too.