

Prepare the world to receive Him

Isaiah 61:1–3

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; ² To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; ³ To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

Dear Christian Friends,

Jesus said, “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a basket, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 5:14–16). With those words Jesus lays no burden upon you, for if it is truly a burden to let the light of your faith shine before men, then your faith is hardly worth showing. It is no burden for a candle to give light. In fact, its light must be covered over completely in order to hide that light. Yet even covered, the light still shines. So it is with our faith. It always shines with the brightness of Christ, because we do not make it shine. It does this all by itself, for the light of our faith is God’s light. We *can* however, cover it up, refuse to let allow men to be exposed to this light.

Both of our lessons this evening spoke concerning John the Baptist. The first of his birth, the second of His ministry. John had one purpose in the world: to prepare men to receive Christ by preaching Repentance. He was a preacher whose job, as John chapter 1 declared, was to bear witness to the light of Christ. The preaching of John is critical. Jesus declared Himself to the world, saying “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” All other prophets direct men to Jesus, for that is the essence of the office of a prophet. But among all such prophets, John is the greatest who ever lived. John is the quintessential prophet, greater than all others save Him whom he declared. John is the greatest because he is the foremost preacher of repentance, the foremost example of piety and godliness, and the boldest among the prophets who declares, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb, and yet even He must bow down before Jesus and confess that he is not worthy to

so much as untie Jesus’ sandals.

During this Advent, we acknowledge that we have sinned much, and are in no way worthy to receive our King. We have been slothful, have wasted our time living for our own self-interest, giving time to our Lord only as an afterthought. We are often caught up in the Christmas frenzy of the world which disrupts the peace which this blessed season lays before our eyes and offers us in rich measure. Therefore we heed the preaching of John, and repent of our sloth, our wasted time, our callousness, and every other sin, that we might know the true joy of Christmas, that God, in Christ Jesus His Son, has come to take away all our sins and to give us righteousness and life. All these things we have learned this Advent season, so that we might take back from the world the celebration of the birth of our Savior, and worship him in Spirit and in Truth.

I have only one more thing to add, as we proceed to Christmas Day. Just as we need to take Christmas back from the world, we also need to take Christmas, and give it to the world. You know full well how *you* should view your Savior’s birth, but you have been placed into this world not only to know your Savior, but also to tell of Him. The life of the Christian is one of confession, and by that I do not mean only the confession of your sins, but chiefly this: the confession of your faith. In Christmas, the light of Christ which has shined into our hearts, is reflected back out into the world. May we learn well to display this light to men.

It is such confession that our lesson speaks this evening. It is the confession that is on the lips of John the Baptist. It is the confession that is on the lips of every faithful preacher. It is the preacher that is speaking in our lesson, for God has called Him to broadcast His Good News to men. But do not think that these words do not apply to you. God has gifted you with the preaching of His Word, not that you might bury it in your heart, but that you might become a living reflection of the Gospel. In whatever calling God has given you, be you a parent, a friend, an employee, your words and actions can either reflect the light that God has preached into your heart, or you can hide this light so that no man sees it. Yet Jesus does not say “your pastors” are the light of the world. *You* are that light. You are as close as most people will get to hearing the Word of God in church, and therefore it is you who are in the best position to give Christmas back to the world.

Is there any time of the year more appropriate than Christmas to declare Christ to all men? On most secular radio stations you can hear music which declares, wonder of wonders, the birth of our Savior. When else does such a thing happen? Do you hear easter music on the

local rock and roll station during Easter? Of course not. And yet, during Christmas, Christ is before the people of our nation more than at any other time.

And yet, to most of the eyes that view Christ as he is depicted in a manger, with shepherds and wise men, they do not see the greatest miracle the world has even known. Although they may attach some amount of significance to the birth of Jesus, they do not know who this Child is. Most people know what Christians believe, that Jesus is the Savior, the Son of God, but what good does this do for them? You also understand what certain other religions teach. You might know what a Mormon believes, but you certainly don't believe it.

Knowing a bit of Christian doctrine does not help the world, because most people in this world are not ready for the knowledge that Jesus is their Savior. To proclaim only this to them will accomplish nothing all by itself. The Gospel message of good tidings, of liberty, of the acceptable year of the Lord, of comfort, of joy, and of praise as so beautifully described here in Isaiah, will mean nothing to most people.

Why is this? Because it is not to the entire world that the message of Christmas bring joy, but only to a select group of people. Our lesson describes them: they are the meek, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, and the mourners. It is they who hear the Gospel message of Christmas and receive it with great joy. As to the rest, it falls on deaf ears.

What is the difference? How are these people different from others? They are called the brokenhearted, because their know that their sins have separated them from God and condemned them to eternal damnation. They are called the meek, because they know better than to think highly of themselves, for who are they before God's throne, but lowly sinners? They are called the prisoners and the captives, because they understand how unable they are to free themselves from their master, sin. They mourn because of these things. It is to them that the Christmas Gospel comes as a great burst of glory. It is they who rejoice at the news, and are utterly transformed by the knowledge that God has been made flesh, and has dwelt among them, and was crucified for their salvation.

How are you supposed to identify such people? Can you tell that a man is contrite and meek just by looking at him? Of course not. Only God knows the hearts of men. You cannot know, for certain, who is ready and prepared for the Christmas Gospel. Most people need to be brought to the knowledge of their sins. They need to understand that they are prisoners before the Gospel can set them free.

What does this mean for you? First, that you cannot

proclaim only the good news to men. You must also proclaim the bad news. This means that as you speak of the Christ Child whom God has sent into the world, you cannot neglect to explain why it was necessary for God to come in human flesh. It was not because He was looking to make new friend, but because of sin. Sin, the Scriptures tell us, is the transgression of the Law. You cannot neglect the Law of God which is the only thing convict men of their sins. But this also is no burden, for who are you but a sinner, who has been redeemed. Therefore to men you can declare, "I rejoice, because I was dead in my trespasses and sins, but in Christ I live again. I would that all men knew that they were dead in their sins, so that they to might be brought to newness of life." To show to all men who this Christ Child truly is, you must proclaim the whole Word of God.

Secondly, because you cannot know the hearts of any man, you must be ready to declare the Word of God to all men. Where are the brokenhearted? Where are the captives? Where are the meek? Who is ready to hear the miracle that the Christ Child is the Lord God of heaven come to earth for their salvation? You will never know for certain. Nor do you need to. For when you are a light in the world, you are a light to the whole world. Why pick and choose to whom you will broadcast the light of Christ? Rather, do not hide that light, so that at all times, in your speaking and working, in everything that you do and say, you declare the glory of Christ to men.

Our Lord Christ is truly the Savior of the world. Never forget what that means. And when you hear the angels declare, "peace on earth, good will toward men" never forget that these words mean all men. We cannot save the world. God does not expect us to. In fact, we cannot save a single person. Only God's Spirit can do that. He alone can truly bind up the broken hearted, and open the prisons to them that are bound. He alone grants joy, peace, and the spirit of praise to men when He brings them to know Jesus Christ. That is why our lesson calls them "the planting of the Lord". They are His workmanship, and not our own. He makes them into trees of righteousness, so that He alone is glorified. The amazing thing is that He gives us a part in His work, by making us the bearers of His Word. What a humbling thought. May we then not neglect to give Christmas back to the world this Christmas season. Amen.