

## “Good News for People who Need it”

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Luke 1:46-55

One year when I was in social work school, I was very much looking forward to Thanksgiving break. I was living in central North Carolina at the time and planned to drive the six or so hours up to my grandparents' house in Maryland. Every year for as far back as I can remember, I made that trip to see grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins. With that side of my family, tradition means so much – same foods, same faces, same bad jokes. But I noticed that year in the week leading up to the holiday that my throat had started getting a little scratchy. My nose was stuffed up and I was feeling more tired every day. The day before I was set to leave, I took my temperature and, sure enough, I had a fever. I slowly started to consider what this would mean – no grandma and grandpa, no mashed potatoes, no goofing off with cousins. There was just no way that I could make a six hour drive alone safely. My heart sank as I considered a Thanksgiving dinner that started with peeling the foil from a frozen dinner.

Somehow or other, my good friend Sheena caught wind of my sudden upset. She called me up and said, “why don't you come to Kernersville and have Thanksgiving dinner with Momma and Daddy and Kayla and me?” She said that I wouldn't have to do anything or bring anything – she'd even pick me up – because no one should be alone and miserable for the holidays. I think I tried to politely decline. I didn't want to intrude on her family traditions, but she was charmingly insistent, wrapped me up in a blanket, and stuffed me in her car for dinner. Now, my mom's family is from up north, but Sheena's family is home grown North Carolina. While I had been so worried about what I was missing of food and family, I didn't know that I had never had Southern Thanksgiving before. There were amazing dishes I'd never had – some kind of candied orange Jello something and hash brown casserole. Y'all, I'd been eating hash

browns all my life, but I never knew until that moment that you could put ‘em in a casserole. It was amazing – the family embraced me, the food filled me, and the love and generosity overwhelmed me. I missed my own family and our unique traditions, but when I first realized I was sick and my plans were ruined, I had no earthly idea what joy was right there waiting for me.

In many ways, it feels like we’re in that in between place right now. We know a lot of things that are going wrong, we can see so much of what we’ve lost, but we can’t quite see when and where and how that joy will come back to us. And you can’t fake your way into joy. Pretending that you’re happy and fine certainly does not make you happy and fine. And yet...

And yet, when we read these scripture passages, we find words of profound hope and joy: Isaiah speaking about bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, setting prisoners free, sharing God’s grace, comforting mourners, righteousness, glory, renewal, justice, salvation, love. Or look at Mary’s song, which she sings just after Gabriel has told her that she will give birth to Jesus who is, “the Son of the Most High...and of his kingdom there will be no end.” She sees God as lifting up the meek, bringing down the proud and powerful, feeding the hungry, and restoring the children of God.

It’s like Isaiah and Mary read the last page of the book and they can’t wait to tell everyone about it. It’s like they got a sneak peak at Southern Thanksgiving and they need everybody to know how amazing it is. Because we know that when they each proclaimed this news of joy, it wasn’t to people who were perfectly pleased and content. Isaiah speaks to those suffering in exile, unjustly imprisoned, mourning loss, weak from worry, burdened by reckless use of power. Mary speaks to the downtrodden, the hungry, the vulnerable, but she also speaks to the oppressors, the proud, the greedy. Isaiah and Mary know that joy is coming. They have seen

the end of suffering and sorrow and sin and evil and so they choose to celebrate God's promised future today even though suffering and evil continue all around them.

This year, we find ourselves in between – things aren't good the way they used to be and they aren't yet the good that they will be again. But, still, the joy of God is waiting for us. We may be fortunate to feel it today or tomorrow, for our Christmas celebrations – or it may take a little longer for us to feel that joy once more. Still, God has sown grace, mercy, and love into the earth – into the garden where we are planted. Holding on to hope, we can rejoice, too, trusting that in Christ righteousness and praise will spring up in our hearts, in our lives, and in our world. The joy of Christ will fill our lives once more, lifting our burdens, and setting us free. Amen.