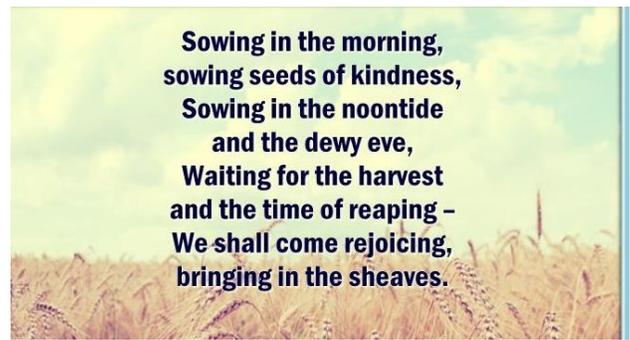


Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalm 126

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28



### THE LORD HAS DONE GREAT THINGS FOR US

**Isa 61:1-4.** *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; <sup>3</sup>to grant to 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; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified. <sup>4</sup>They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.”<sup>1</sup>*

• *The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me ... (v.1).* The original setting for these words was Babylon, where the Israelites were held captive. The people expected literal fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy at that time, just as his prophecy to King Hezekiah in Isa 39:5-7 had previously been literally fulfilled: *“Behold, the days are coming, when all that is in your house, and that which your fathers have stored up till this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the Lord. And some of your own sons, who are born to you, shall be taken away; and they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”*

And this new prophecy in Isaiah 61 was indeed fulfilled literally. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C, after 70 years of enslavement in Babylon, king Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return home. The captives were at last set free (v.1), and the time of their return was, undeniably, *the year of the Lord's favor* (v.2).

But “freedom” in the Middle East has always been elusive. Ever since they returned from captivity in 538 B.C., the Jews have suffered all kinds of persecutions and enslavements, as have other tribes and nations and ethnic groups. A lifetime of freedom has never been something one can count on.

Furthermore, “freedom” also has a spiritual dimension, not only for Jews, but for all mankind. Paul spoke for all of us when he wrote, *“I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members”* (Rom 7:21-23.)

Thus, the whole world of humanity remained in the captivity of its own nature until finally, on one day long anticipated and awaited by the angels, Jesus Christ came to a synagogue in Nazareth and once again read v.1 and part of v.2 to the congregation:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord”* (Luke 4:18-19).

When Jesus finished reading he said, *“Today, in your hearing, this scripture has been fulfilled!”* He was announcing the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah 61.

Consider the spiritual, rather than physical, meaning of each of the five things the Spirit anointed Jesus to proclaim on that day. For example, *“good news to the poor”* is addressed to the *poor in spirit* as well as the economically poor; and the *captives* are held captive in *sin* as well as in the prisons of men. There are people in prisons today whose *captivity* is less restrictive than that of some of us on the outside. And regarding *blindness*, do not some with poor eyesight “see” farther and better than some of us with 20/20? And finally, how are we *oppressed*, and how are we *set at liberty* through faith in Jesus Christ?

<sup>1</sup> Bible quotations are from the RSV unless otherwise noted.

• “... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor ...” (v.2, NIV). Jesus called this “*the acceptable year of the Lord.*” In our understanding, this refers to the age we live in, when the free gift of God’s grace is available to all people. The Bible says, “*Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus ...*” (Rom 3:23-24).

• “... and the day of vengeance of our God ...” (v.2). Jesus did not read further because the rest of Isa 61, in addition to being for the Jews in exile, refers to the Second Advent. Jesus did not come to judge or punish men for their sins. He came to save men from their sins. “*For God sent the Son into the world, not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through him*” (John 3:17).

In Isa 61:10-11, notice again the spiritual interpretation, “... *he has clothed me with the robe of righteousness ...*” in connection with Eph 4:22-24, “*Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.*”

Also note the reference to the bridegroom and bride in v.10 with Rev 19:6-8, “... *Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.*” For the unbelieving world, the *day of vengeance* will bring destruction and eternal separation from God. For believers, that same *day* will bring the bride and the bridegroom together at last.

Psalm 126. *When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. <sup>2</sup>Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them." <sup>3</sup>The Lord has done great things for us; we are glad.*

*<sup>4</sup>Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb! <sup>5</sup>May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy! <sup>6</sup>He that goes forth weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.*

• *We were like those who dream* (v.1). After the 70-year Babylonian captivity, few could remember actually living in Jerusalem. For these people, captivity was a way of life. Yet the dreams of home and freedom never faded, and the vision of Micah, “... *nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree,*” (Micah 4:3-4), remained in the hearts of faithful Jews throughout their captivity.

And again, the world of humanity today is far from home. We are living as slaves in bondage. Many have grown used to our enslavement and no longer yearn for freedom from our bondage to sin. “What else is there?” we ask. And we see Christ, and one day we also may say “*We were like those who dream.*”

• *The Lord has done great things for us ...* (v.3). Mary said something like this: “*He who is mighty has done great things for me ...*” (Luke 1:49). One “great thing” stands forever above all: the Cross of Jesus Christ.

• *May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy* (v.5). The psalm provides a wonderful picture of homecoming – of the Jews to Jerusalem, and of believers to the kingdom of God. The seeds of the gospel of salvation have been sown, often with tears, and those who sow them will *reap with shouts of joy*. (See also James 5:7-8.) With these things in mind, are you willing to share your faith with someone today?

• *He that goes forth weeping ...* (v.6). As the Jews were captives and slaves in Babylon, so we also were captives and slaves to sin until Christ came. The tears we weep are tears of repentance. Like the Israelites in Babylon, and like the prodigal son in the far country, we must come to ourselves and say, “*I will arise and go to my father,*” (Luke 15:18).

We can see in Psalm 126, as well as in Isaiah 61, symbols of things in the spirit of one who turns to Christ for salvation. Our hearts feel strangely warmed as we sing these verses of Knowles Shaw (1874):

“Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness, sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve;  
Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping, we shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.”

Believers in Christ are pilgrims headed for a country seen not with the eye but with the spirit. May we join with Christians everywhere on the homeward journey, *bringing in the sheaves!*