

Isaiah's Prophecy of Salvation

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish

Bryn Athyn, December 8th, 2024

Our lesson today is taken from *Isaiah* 61, verses 1-3, where we read that the prophet was sent to his people to do five particular things:

1. "to preach good tidings to the poor;"
2. "to heal the brokenhearted,"
3. "to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *those who are* bound;"
4. "to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God;"
5. and "to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;"

As we continue, this month, with preparations for our celebration of the Advent, it seems particularly useful to focus on what the Lord actually accomplished by coming into our world, which, as we know, was nothing less than to provide for the salvation of the whole human race. But what does that really mean? These verses from *Isaiah* offer us a beautiful summary explanation. (If you'd like to follow along in your pew Bibles, you'll find the text on page 522.)

Of course, we know that the original Hebrew of our text has the name, YHWH, or Jehovah, where we see the word, Lord. The prophet actually said, "The spirit of *Jehovah* God is upon me..." because the Lord, as we know Him, had not yet come into the world, and Jehovah is the Hebrew word often translated as "Lord" out of respect for the holiness of the original Hebrew. But the verses prophesy, or predict, this event, and as you heard from Luke, when He began his ministry, Jesus read those words in the synagogue in Nazareth, declaring that they were indeed fulfilled in Him (*Luke* 4:18-21). So, what does the prophecy say about the Lord's mission?

Each of things Isaiah listed, including the image of "beauty for ashes" and "the oil of joy," associated with comfort and consolation, is deeply symbolic and deserves our thoughtful attention. And together they provide a good working explanation of the whole process of salvation.

So let's begin with the Lord's preaching of good tidings to the poor. We know from the Sermon on the Mount (*Matthew* 5:3) that this is not just a reference to financial poverty, but to "the poor in spirit," and we also know from the Heavenly Doctrine that this refers to those who humbly acknowledge their sins and are willing to repent and be reformed. The "good tidings" the Lord proclaimed then were that *when* we repent, we can experience His *instantaneous* mercy and forgiveness. This is *huge*, and something we need to learn to appreciate with real conviction. True, we may not (in fact, we probably will not) realize instantaneous improvement in our *outward* lives, but *inwardly* we can know – for certain – that the Lord is with us and will help us get there.

Now let's think about His work of healing the brokenhearted. This is easy to see in the stories of the New Testament, where the Lord routinely contrasts His forgiveness and mercy with the harsh judgments of the religious leaders of His day. To the woman caught in adultery, the sick and lame, the sinner humbly praying in the synagogue, and many others, the Lord did not judge or condemn, but had a simple message: "I am the way, the truth and the life." In other words,

“Follow Me, and I will lead you to a better life!” And it's the same today, especially when we suffer from spiritual sickness, hardship and pain. We just need to be patient, and careful, and remember to follow the rules.

But what about “proclaiming liberty to the captives?” Many people in New Testament times had been held captive, not just by harsh rulers, but by harsh teachings about rules and customs that made life really difficult for them to enjoy freely. In His teaching the Lord explained what these rules and customs really meant, and showed that having a good life is not so hard after all. In fact, it's easy! All we have to do is listen to Him, and co-operate with Him. Then we will be able to feel the healing, freeing power of His love. In the end, this is all about making choices, knowing that the Lord will support us if we make the right choices. Still, we can only make those right choices when we know what *is* right, and what we *should* be doing.

Remember, in this morning's recitation, where the Lord said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (*Matthew 5:4*)? That mourning is the grief we feel over the things that we know are not right in our lives, and it is the fundamental condition necessary for reform, so that we can be comforted. Often when we are in this state, we despair of ever feeling really free of it, knowing that everything we have ever thought or done is lodged in our memories, contributing in some way to our experience of ourselves. But remember, too, that liberating teaching repeated several times in the Heavenly Doctrine, that “If a person believed, as is the truth, that all good and truth originate from the Lord, and all evil and falsity from hell, he would not appropriate good to himself and account it meritorious, nor would he appropriate evil to himself and account himself responsible for it” (AC 2606 & 3812:2, NJHD 2787, HH 302, DP 320). The business of repentance and reformation is simply about making choices, knowing that the Lord does not regard us as we were, or as we might be, but as we *are* in our intentions at any given time.

On the point of liberation from captivity, “and the opening of the prison to *those who are* bound,” remember that to be a captive in the spiritual sense is to be constrained by evils or falsities. Indeed, the Lord said, “Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (*John 8:34*), but He also said, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, *and the truth shall make you free*” (*John 8:31-32*). So the Lord taught, and still teaches us today, everything we need to know in order to be released from the bondage of bad attitudes and wrong or foolish ideas. In effect, He has shown us how we can be *saved* from these influences if we will follow His instructions. Actually, we *are* saved; we are *predestined* to heaven, but we can't receive that salvation, we can't accept that predestination without co-operating. (Think of a lifeboat being offered to a drowning man, who for whatever reason refuses to get in, or a rope being thrown to someone being swept away toward a crashing waterfall, who won't grab on to it.)

The next characteristic of salvation listed in Isaiah's prophecy is that He will “proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (**Jehovah**), and the day of vengeance of our **God**.” So what is this “acceptable year” and what is this “day of vengeance?” Why Jehovah in one case and God in the other? And how does vengeance of any kind fit with the Lord's infinite love?

Well, “The acceptable year,” is a phrase that just means “the year of acceptance,” or “the time of good pleasure,” and it is about any time when people please the Lord by making good choices. And vengeance comes from the word, revenge, which means getting even, but the Lord doesn't use that word the way we do. What He means by it that people get what they deserve. So “the

day of vengeance” is anytime people face the consequences of their evil. Of course we know that the Lord won't really exact vengeance, but it will seem that way to those whose loves are evil, as they blame the Lord for their problems rather than taking any personal responsibility. Besides, in the symbolism of the Word, “God” is a name that represents Divine truth, as distinct from good, and we know that truth can be harsh, even damning to anyone who is out of order, whereas “the acceptable year” is said about the Lord, or “Jehovah,” whose name represents the goodness of love and mercy. So, in summary, any time the Lord comes to us, He will in perfect love fulfill all of our aspirations, and in perfect wisdom permit us to experience the consequences of our bad choices, thus preserving our sense of freedom and responsibility.

All of this applies to all of us every day since the Lord glorified His human nature, and even more since the detailed revelation for the New Church was published. We have salvation at our fingertips through the pages of the literal and spiritual senses of the Word. Or, if we choose it, we have the judgment of our own bad habits to condemn us. And this will, indeed, “comfort all who mourn, [and] console those who mourn in Zion.”

Why? Think of it this way: think about all the people in the world who don't know the truth, or who are misled by wrong interpretations of the Word (what we now call disinformation). These poor people, like the helpless victims of gangs or international aggression, suffer every day at the hands of their persecutors, and while they may not wish any evil to them on this account, surely they are comforted when the aggression is stopped and those enemies have to face the consequences of their crimes, *preventing them from doing any further harm*.

Speaking of comfort and consolation, you know that the Holy Spirit is referred to in John's Gospel as “the Comforter,” and in some translations, “the Helper,” right (*John 14:26*)? And that this is also referred to as “the Spirit of truth” (*John 16:13*)? So here, again, we see the gift of salvation in the help and comfort of *knowing what is true*, so that we can co-operate with the Lord and receive His blessings. As Jesus said, “For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth” (*John 18:37*). And not only bear witness to it, but fully glorify it, removing all impurities so that we can have a clear understanding of all the laws of order that provide for our peace and well-being. ...If only we will pay attention.

So now we come to the part of the prophecy that promises to give those who mourn “beauty for ashes, [and] the oil of joy for mourning.” Here we need to remember the ancient Jewish custom of literally covering themselves – or even rolling in – dust and ashes as a way of expressing of their shame or humility. We don't do this sort of thing today, but we all know the feeling, right? Shame and embarrassment about doing something wrong, knowing we don't deserve anything better than dust and ashes. But here's the thing: if we are willing to admit we were wrong, and ask the Lord to help us do better, He can turn the whole situation around, and give us new feelings of peace and real blessing.

So the ashes of humility can be replaced by the oil of heavenly joy! Not only is oil a natural salve for injuries, it actually represents the goodness of love, which is exactly what provides for and promotes our salvation from all sorts of bitterness, meanness and self-pity. And in that context, remember what the angel told Joseph about the Son that would be born of Mary: “...you shall call His name, Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (*Matthew 1:21*) – not the sins of the Romans, the Greeks, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, or any worldly powers today,

but from our own sins when we turn to Him and keep His commandments (*John* 14:21-23).

Now, there's an appearance that if we do this, subordinating our own loves to His teachings, we will lose ourselves in the process. But the amazing thing is that the more we do it, the more closely we are conjoined with Him, the wiser we become, the happier we become, and the more we feel like we are masters of ourselves (DP 33 – 44). It surely is one of the miracles of a heavenly life, but it takes time – and patience – as we freely choose to participate *in* the process.

So, finally, we have “the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.” And here again, recall the Sermon on the Mount, where the Lord blessed the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry, the thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and all who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (or justice). These last, especially, are told to “Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven” (*Matthew* 5:3-12). This rejoicing really is the praise referred to in *Isaiah* – praise that springs from acknowledging His Divine providence in every detail of our lives, and being truly thankful for His love and wisdom, no matter what.

And note, our praise of the Lord is referred to as a *garment*: why is that? Well, just as a garment is an external thing, covering our bodies for modesty, protection or warmth, so our praise of the Lord is at first an external, intellectual thing, a matter of conscience until our will “catches up” and really feels the blessings in our circumstances. Yes, we may say, the Lord knows what He is doing, even if we don't feel it very deeply at first; even if we have to suffer to learn. But this “garment of praise” can come to reflect a much deeper reality in time, a reality represented by the “trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that *they* may be glorified.”

Trees in the Word symbolize human life, from the roots to the branches, leaves, flowers and fruit. Curiously, traditional translations of this phrase (including the one in your pew Bibles) suggest that it is the Lord who will be glorified by this transformation, which may be true in a way, but the real teaching in this case is that *we* will be glorified, that is, made new, better, brighter, and happier by this work. The Lord doesn't need our paltry praise to be glorified – or for any other reason! He is glory itself, the sun that shines on the evil and on the good in every circumstance (*Matthew* 5:45). But His plan, His purpose, His will is that *we* should experience His glory *as if it were our own*, and so enjoy the blessings of a truly spiritual life.

This is the very definition of salvation – salvation from spiritual poverty, grief, misery, the constraints of falsity, and all the heaviness that comes from our self-centered, worldly thoughts and cravings. Can we believe it? Can we receive it? ***The Lord knows we can***, and He urges us to do so, with His help through the life and teachings He has provided for us in His Word and in His Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church.

Amen.

Lessons: *Isaiah* 61
 Luke 4:14-24
 True Christian Religion #2
Recitation: *Matthew* 5:3-12 (Liturgy #484)