

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who actually was the Good News of our Salvation, Jesus Christ our Savior and our Lord, amen.

The Spirit descended upon the prophet Isaiah sometime during the time after the Israelites had returned to Jerusalem in order to rebuild their once beautiful temple. Over 500 years before the birth of Jesus, God's Holy Spirit empowered him to bring good news to the captives, proclaim liberty and announce God's everlasting covenant. You see the people of the time when Isaiah wrote this were in great distress. Yes, Emperor Cyrus released them to return some 1500 miles back to Jerusalem. Yes, that same Cyrus had issued orders for lumber and other building requirements to be shipped to Jerusalem. So, why were the Hebrew people in such great distress that they needed this word of encouragement from the prophet? What had gone wrong with God's plan?

After consulting with several leading commentaries, my assessment is the people who returned followed after their own desires before pursuing God's will. I say that because the reason they were allowed to return to Jerusalem in the first place was to rebuild the Temple. During this time of what scholars call Third Isaiah, not much had been done along those lines. The people began by trying to grow crops, rebuild their own homes, and fortify the wall around Jerusalem. Does any of that sound like the Temple was anywhere near their top priority? So, that's the situation in which these returned exiles found themselves. Between the

draught, crop failures, hunger, and inflation, the people were in dire straits. Their civil and religious leaders looked only after their own personal gain and the court system was riddled with utter corruption. Hmmm, sound familiar? On top of all that, there was great enmity between the masses of the people. The ones who returned from exile looked down upon the ones who had been left behind. That bias and discrimination between the Jews who had returned from exile and the Samaritans who were the ones left behind lasted for many hundreds of years. Most of what we call Third Isaiah arose against this background of severe hardship and division. The early attempt at rebuilding the Temple lay in ruins, as did the lives of most of the people who lived in these Holy Lands. The people needed some encouragement. They needed some glimpse of Good News amid their bleak world. As we prepare for the future--for the birth of the Christ Child and the arrival of the King of kings--we once again glance to the past, but looking back helps us see God's plan for our future....

The Exodus out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness to the Promised Land and the Exile to Babylon consume a significant portion of the Old Testament. There are several reasons for this. First, they are major events in the history of Israel. They are also very reflective of our individual and corporate lives. What I mean is that back then as now life is neither pretty nor easy. It can get to be awfully messy. That was the situation of the people of Third Isaiah's time. In this

passage of scripture, they are addressed as the oppressed, the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners and people who mourn. Into that situation of bleakness, the Prophet Isaiah writes; 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...

Perhaps we can identify with the returned exiles. There are times we feel oppressed by the expectation of others; brokenhearted because of loved ones who can no longer celebrate this Christmas season with us; captive to credit card debit and prisoner to over scheduled calendars. There are times when our lives are cluttered. At other times our lives are a mess, and occasionally our lives are disasters. The Lord did not abandon God's people during their exile, nor does God abandon us in the messiness of our lives. Quite the contrary, into those situations God speaks a word of hope. Hear the Word of the Lord!

God speaks good news to the oppressed. I have someone very close to me who has been suffering from severe, debilitating headaches for many years. Modern medicine has only been able to provide mild, temporary relief. As she struggles to face days filled with pain, God's Good News comes to her and that good news is God loves her deeply and God will not abandon her. I also know some of you have lost loved ones during the time around the holidays. Now the

days before Christmas are filled with sadness rather than the joy and excitement of our newborn Savior. Still, this Word of God is for all of us who have suffered the loss of our loved ones. We can rejoice in the hope of the resurrection and the promise of being reunited one day. In the meanwhile, family and especially our Church Family surround us with love and the strength and comfort that only a faith community can provide. That's why we make the effort to do extra cleaning, have prepackaged communion, and wear our facemasks diligently, so we can gather together as God's people to hear the Good News that God is still our God and God has not abandoned us, even in this messy time of political, economic, and civil uncertainty. Somehow I feel the weight of expectation, of anticipation more this year than ever before. Maybe it's because in addition to the coming of Jesus on Christmas I'm hoping for the coming of the vaccine that is promised to relieve over 95 percent of the suffering, death, and anxiety caused by the Covid Pandemic. I pray for the quick supply, especially to the most vulnerable among us...

I know many people this year who are held captive by anxiety and oppressed by fear. There are times when God's love, acceptance, forgiveness and grace break into those lives and set them free. I pray our world can experience more of those times... This is an ongoing struggle against so many powerful forces that want to keep the people held down and as far away from the Good News of God's Salvation as possible. These powers and principalities rely on anxiety and fear to

keep the masses from uniting under the Word of God. Yet, even to those who are consumed with fear, God's Word of love and peace enters our World.

Thousands of people have faced tragedies during 2020. Besides the Covid Pandemic, recently there have been disastrous wildfires. Earlier in the year there were hurricanes, floods and tornadoes, so many in fact that the weather guessers had to use the Greek Alphabet to name them because they had used all the English letters for named storms. Now, we're on the verge of receiving a vaccine for the Covid virus, but people are still dying. The latest figures I saw last week were 300,000 deaths in the United States alone. In the midst of devastation, upheaval and loss, God is still present in words and in actions. God's presence is experienced, and God's love is demonstrated.

Why are you hear today? And for those watching on Social Media, what has brought you here at this moment in time? I believe we're all here right now because our lives have been touched by God. We have heard the Good News. We have received the strength and ability to endure because of the hope and encouragement we have heard in God's Word and experienced among God's people when we have been oppressed. Our broken hearts have been comforted and we have been set free from fear, sin and death precisely because of the Good News of God's Word.

Now, it is our privilege to share the good news of what God has done for us by seeking out the lost and broken, by welcoming them into our world—a world where sin, death, and the devil do not win the day. In this way others will hear the good news and they too will experience God's love and power in their lives. Perhaps God wants to use your brokenness to heal the brokenness of another of His children who need to hear how God brought you through your own personal devastation.

Not only do we share, we also rejoice. As the voice of Isaiah speaks from days far gone, “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness...” We rejoice because in this Season of Advent we hear the good news and see God's love and promise for our future. May your anxiety be lowered and your fear be gone as you place your trust on the Word of God. May your hope be contagious and your love overflowing as you prepare to once again welcome our Lord Jesus Christ into your heart this Christmas. Amen.