

Isaiah 61

Christmas is not just about baby Jesus. We have all heard countless sermons on the shepherds, the wise men, the angels and Joseph and Mary. And we should know these wonderful stories. God humbling himself to become a man is inconceivable by itself, but God becoming a human zygote, growing to full term and being born into a cruel and dangerous world? No one saw that coming.

Yes, the prophets spoke about many aspects of the coming Messiah—his power, his rule, his sacrifice and even his suffering. The prophet Micah foretold that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. That's why King Herod slaughtered all of boys in that town 2 years old and younger. As we look at all of the Messianic prophecies we can piece together God being born as a child in a small Judean village, but in real time, no one saw that coming.

My point is that Christmas is not just about the baby Jesus but it is fundamentally about his first coming. It's in that spirit that I want to focus on one of the messianic prophecies from Isaiah chapter 61.

1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
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;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to grant to those who mourn in Zion—

to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment 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.

4 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.

5 Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks;
foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;

6 but you shall be called the priests of the LORD;
they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
and in their glory you shall boast.

7 Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion;
instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot;
therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion;
they shall have everlasting joy.

8 For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

9 Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed.

10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.

Even if you don't regularly read the Psalms, this chapter is familiar for at least two reasons. One reason is that we occasionally sing a worship song called Garments of Praise that was taken directly from Isaiah 61. The lyrics of that song will have more meaning to you after this message. The other and much more important reason it is familiar to us is because Jesus applied this passage to himself.

Let me set the scene for you. Jesus has just been baptized by John the Baptist. Do you remember what happens immediately after his baptism? Next comes the forty days of fasting in the desert

capped off by the three temptations from Satan, when Jesus was in his most weary state. Jesus emerged from the desert and that temptation and immediately started teaching in the synagogues in Galilee. Very soon he found himself Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath in his hometown of Nazareth.

What we forget is that Jesus grew up in this town and was in this very synagogue all of the time. He probably attended school at the synagogue starting at age five or six. He memorized the Torah in that synagogue. He grew up and became a man in that synagogue and surrounded by the same people year after year. Nazareth was a small town with a population of about 400. That's about the size of Readstown—just the city itself, not everyone with a Readstown address. So it was a tiny town and everyone knew everyone else. Jesus was the hometown boy.

With all of that as the backdrop, we pick up the story in Luke 4.

16 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. 17 And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

*18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

22 And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" (Luke 4:16-22)

This summer we had an installation service for Ryan where we officially recognized his new role as pastor of equipping. One could almost say that this was Jesus' installation service but in this case, he installed himself by saying, *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* It was the official start of his ministry. It was the fulfillment of his birth, his reason for coming into the world and he announced it using this chapter in Isaiah. Jesus said to his hometown synagogue, "I am this guy. I am the Messiah. It is through me that the good news of salvation will be preached to the world." A few minutes later they tried to kill him. How interesting that on the very day Jesus began his ministry it was also the first time they tried to kill him.

Let's pull some principles from this important passage.

1. The poor in spirit are most receptive to the good news.

Jesus was anointed to bring good news to the poor. This probably includes those who are poor financially but it is predominantly those who are poor in spirit. This makes the most sense because of the lines of Scripture that follow it.

because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the *poor*;
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*;

Those who are poor are paired with the brokenhearted, the captives and those who are bound. Clearly, Jesus was not saying that he was going to literally break people out of prison. This is spiritual language reminiscent of the Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:30). The word translated as poor is actually a much stronger word. When we use the word poor, we mean not enough. Especially in the U.S., a poor person has less than most people. They still have a cell phone, internet, a roof over their head and food on the table. They struggle to make ends meet and may be awash in debt, but they have their basic needs met.

But the word is much different than that. The word poor here means to be poverty stricken, to be destitute, to be a beggar. This is not having just enough. It's having absolutely nothing. You wake up with nothing and unless someone gives you something you will still have nothing. It translates this into spiritual destitution, absolute spiritual poverty.

Psalm 34:18 says that "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit." The good news is proclaimed to all people but only those who realize that they are poor in spirit will receive the good news. Isn't this what Jesus said to the Pharisees? "And Jesus answered them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). Jesus did not mean that the Pharisees were righteous but rather that the Pharisees mistakenly believed that they were righteous. They thought they were well and had no need for the Great Physician to heal them. But the sinners are likened to those who are sick and are painfully aware that they need healing. But being poor in spirit does not end at conversion. Jesus said "apart from me you can do nothing." Apart from abiding in Christ we are spiritually bankrupt.

2. The promises of God are guaranteed by the character of God.

Part of Isaiah 61 is wrapped up in specific promises to the nation of Israel. Verses 4-7 and probably verse 9 are tied to specific promises that were already fulfilled prior to Jesus' day. That may be why Jesus did not quote the entire Psalm.

Nevertheless, verse eight gives the foundation for fulfilled promises.

For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

God's character is one that loves justice and righteousness. His promises are guaranteed by his character. He can only act according to his perfect, eternal character. Just as everything about his first coming was completely fulfilled so will everything promised about his second coming. We

can trust in this promises, not because our faith is so strong but because his character is so strong. The object of our faith is worthy of our faith.

3. We are becoming more of what we already are.

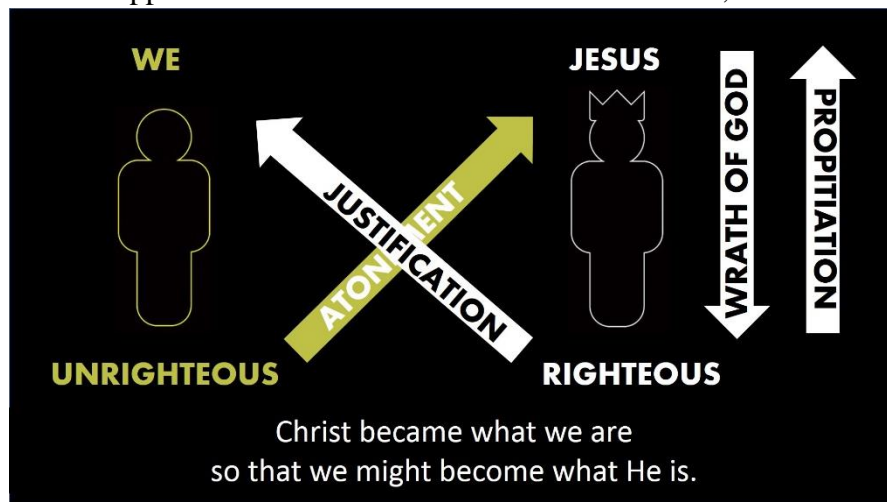
The end result of the good news being preached to the poor and brokenhearted comes at the end of verse three—that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD. This is paired with verse eleven. For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

OK, so what is an “oak of righteousness” and what does it have to do with you and me? First, let me ask a related question. Why did Jesus use agricultural illustrations and parables? The typical answer to this question is because Jesus lived in a purely agricultural society. Of course Jesus would talk about the parable of the soils and faith like a mustard seed. That’s what was most familiar to the people in the first century. They were all farmers and people of the land. There was no manufacturing or industry. There was mostly agriculture, so that is what Jesus pulled from for his parables and teaching.

I believe the typical answer is wrong. Jesus used agricultural illustrations to teach about the kingdom of God because the Kingdom of God is a living entity. Only an illustration that has organic, living things could best illustrate the living entity which is the Kingdom of God. Has Jesus lived and taught in our day, it is possible that he would have used illustrations from the world of technology or the like. However, I am convinced that his core truths would still be illustrated with living things like crops, trees and vineyards. Trees and vines are alive. Cell phones and assembly lines are not.

The kingdom of God is alive so it makes sense to use the term an “oak of righteousness.” Oak trees are not only alive but they grow to be large, strong trees. But what does that actually mean that we are an oak of righteousness?

Some of you will recall the Great Exchange that we covered in the book of Romans. Jesus is perfectly righteous but we are sinful and unrighteous. Atonement is what happens when our sins are applied to Jesus. Because Jesus carried our sins, the wrath of God was poured out on

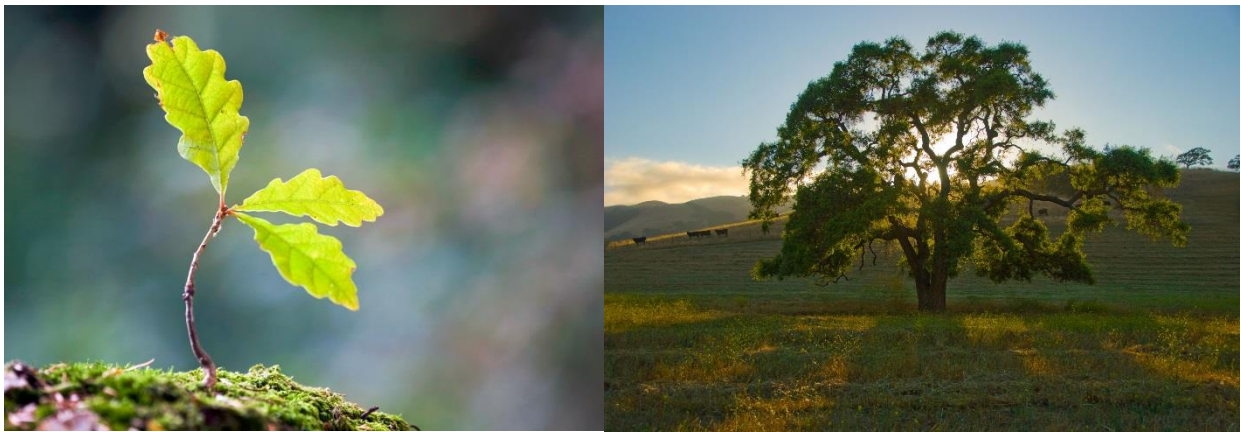


Christ with a result that Jesus satisfied the wrath of God, which is called propitiation. Justification is the process of Jesus’ righteousness being applied to our account. This is the part of salvation that we often forget about. When God looks at a believer, he sees the perfect righteousness of His Son.

This is the core of what we mean we talk about our identity on Christ. This is who we actually are.

So how does this apply to being an oak of righteousness? Let me ask you this? In your average, daily life, do you feel like an oak of righteousness? Do you feel like a powerful, strong tree that is able to withstand the strong winds and storms that life throws at you? Most of us probably don't feel like that on most days. The cares of the world and our sinful habits seem to make us feel more like thorn bushes and scraggly weeds more than like a towering oak.

But the Bible promises us that all believers are oaks of righteousness. How can this be true at the same time? Here's how I work it out. Verse three also says that we are a planting of the Lord,



which would make us a righteous planting. So what does that make us? We are an oak of righteousness, yes, but more like an oak sapling. We are no less an oak than this mighty tree is an oak. Spiritually speaking, both are oaks of righteousness. We will never stop being an oak. To be a believer is to be an oak. We have the righteousness of Christ and nothing can change that. In that sense, we are not becoming righteous, we are righteous. This is what gives you right standing before the Lord.

This is why Hebrews says that we can approach the throne of grace with confidence. Remember the story of Esther and what would happen to her if she approached the king without being invited? Such action was worthy of the death penalty. Most kings do not share total access with all of their subjects, let alone allow you to approach at any time with boldness and confidence. But you and I can come to the Lord in this way—absolute confidence—not confidence in ourselves, but confidence in God's promise that when he sees us, he sees the righteousness of Christ.

I believe a lack of understanding of this truth keeps many believers from growing in their faith. If you don't see yourself as being fully accepted by God then you will forever be stuck in between "try harder" and "just give up." You'll either try harder to please God or else you'll give up trying to please him and walk away. The solution to both is to see yourself as God sees you—as an oak of righteousness.

What if Usain Bolt was all depressed because he didn't think he was very fast? What if Michael Phelps didn't think he was a good swimmer. Both of these superstar athletes share one thing in common—God made them fast. They worked hard at being even faster but they started with an identity that was true of them. They both became more of what they already were.

As believers, you and I are becoming more of what we already are. Granted, we start as saplings, planted by the Lord, but we can grow into mighty oaks of righteousness. It is in this sense that we are becoming more of what we already are. This is why Christ came on that blessed Christmas morn.

Rich Maurer
December 25, 2016