

Who we wait on

Menno Mennonite Church
December 17, 2023

Purpose: To sit with the questions of messianic identity as we try to assess the persona we are waiting for.

Message: We wait on the one who character challenges and changes our very world to bring about the image of God with us.

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11 (I will read); Psalm 126 (please read/have read); Luke 1:46b–55
1 Thessalonians 5:16–24; John 1:6–8, 19–28

Synopsis: Throughout the scriptures there is an ongoing mystery: who is the messiah and what does the Messianic identity look like? In many ways this mystery continues centuries later. We are every bit as given to bringing our identities to Christ as was ever speculated on by the ancients. We bring our own images and ideas to the notion of the working of the kingdom, each one wanting to make our notion of the kingdom coming come true. Yet the scripture always seems to defy our easy definitions and push us into the greater sense of God's healing of the nations that is well beyond our imaginations of what can become of the world as we know it.

Isaiah 61:1-14, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
YHWH 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;

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

to provide for 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.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
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.

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

Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in YHWH,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
YHWH has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

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

When is the last time that you played the game *Guess Who*? In case you have never heard of it let me jog your memory. It is a game of memory where both players have a set of flip up cards in a grid which, judging by the characteristics, you sleuth out the identity of who the other player's character is. I remember wanting this as a kid and not getting it (likely too new fangled to be considered). It is only now with my kids that I have gotten to know the game and learn how it works. Some of the guessing goes fairly quickly: male or female, hair color, whether or not they are wearing a hat usually give you a wide variety of possibilities to eliminate until you have your suspects down to the top two or three and you have to make your guess to corner the possibilities. In the end there is always a guess and a conjecture. The object is to be the first to guess the other person's character, and sometimes you have to roll the dice and trust to luck. Other times you can become so obsessed with the minor characteristics that you forget to sort the majors straight away (a strategic mistake that 6 years olds are prone to making, and daddy is not always above exploiting). You play the game, you make your guesses and you hope that in the end you are right—that it was Ian with the bowler hat and the monocle.

This text is a text of identity. It is a dialog between the prophet and YHWH God with the prophet proclaiming the qualities of the one who was to come after—setting release to the captives, good news for the oppressed and all the rest—and the YHWH God who would send the messiah into the world that was waiting on him, declaring the way that things will be that day. Despite it being part of our advent selections, it is not really among the familiar stops of prophecy as we wait upon the coming of the Lord. It doesn't seem to suit the bill; there is no speaking of the root from the stump of Jesse, of making straight the highways or all the rest. Yet it is a waiting text. This is from the sweep of Isaiah which declares the restoration of the people, and the establishment of the place and time where the mountain of the Lord will be fully and firmly established and all will see it together. As such this is an advent text, but one more geared to those waiting on the Messiah to come the first time around, and is less explicitly connected to the one we anticipate celebrating in just several short days.

Still, if these words sound familiar to you they should. This is the text that Jesus selected when he was handed the scroll to read in the Nazareth synagogue in Luke 4 as he takes up his ministry after 40 days in the wilderness. You know: the reading that he claims to himself and prompts his friends and neighbors to run him from town preferably off the nearest cliff. Remember it now? This is the sketch of who the Messiah is and what the Messiah does and he

claims it for himself. “Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” he speaks into the echoing silence of the room and the response was, as we noted, cool to say the least. After 40 days of temptation Jesus resist temptation again. Perhaps the greatest temptation that there is for one delivering the word of God—to tell the people what they want to hear and not what they must hear; to preach a sermon that everyone is going to like because it reinforces that they are good and beloved of God and those over there out of earshot that don’t look like us, act like us, pray like us are deserving of God’s judgement and by extension our judgement too.

But that isn’t Jesus’ way, then or now. He was claiming the mantle that was his and taking up the role of Messiah before the people with whom he lived and worked all his life. They would have fairly plainly understood. This text was the anointing text, and was among the heart readings of the community as they anticipated the coming of the Messiah. Only he changes the script as is so often his want. He makes some minor edits to Isaiah—as is the want of many a rabbi—and omit something along the way. In Luke he recalls the year of the Lord’s favor, but leaves out the declaration of the “day of vengeance for our God.” This seems like a fairly trivial alteration to our ears—so much so we likely didn’t even know to miss it. Over time and given the history of the people who were occupied and disposed so often, I can’t help but wonder whether he left the real applause line lying unread. We read the whole of the text, including God’s good intent to plant these things like a garden and let them take root. Jesus stop with the declaration of the Lord’s favor and more or less leaves it at that. He goes with the abrupt drop of the mic, in effect saying “Oh, and by the way, the year of the Lord’s favor is not just the benefit for those who have claimed that Lord and have trademarked their notion of being the people of YHWH.” That, likely was enough to give them the push from anticipation to anger.

One commentator sums it up this way: “The radical inclusiveness of Jesus’ ministry shocks his audience...They have understood themselves to be the primary beneficiaries of Jesus’ message. They can all relate to being poor, captive, blind or oppressed. They are ready for deliverance, but they are not prepared to share it.”

I think this is what makes this text one that is truly one of advent. We are asked to prepare the way of the Lord. We are asked to repent for the day of the Lord is neigh. We may even wonder alongside so many others who it is that we are waiting for, and the identity of the one who we anticipate. We might even begin building our own profiles of the Messiah that we anticipate: the one with a kind smile and piercing eyes—the physicality we inherit from centuries

of artistic interpretation, misapplied to an individual of Mideastern descent it all but always is. But beyond this, we too may well anticipate the coming of the one we hope will come: the one who will vindicate our ways of thinking and being, our means of following. Our imagination of that coming to completion of all things rarely entertains the possibility of a messiah that might say things that would stretch us beyond our comfort zone, whatever it happens to be. We may not be longing to see the day of the God's vengeance in the same way as those in Nazareth might be (at least not out loud), but I am guessing that there are some things that we have in mind for God's to-do list when the time comes, and we may be holding up our priorities against those of the returning king and find a mismatch. We might wonder who it is we are waiting for anyway.

I think it is telling to consider the things that we do to the gospel. All sorts of things have been incorporated into the way and being of Christian life and practice that sometimes go without question. Like an expectation that those who are on the outside and among the meek of the earth are somehow landed there by choice and consequence, but never by a system that allows those who already have some gain more still without question. Or that if we behave just so, pray the right way and do all the right things God's favor will rest on us far more greatly than everyone else because we have earned it. The gospel of wealth, power and being right has been so firmly and inseparably welded to the way of being church it causes many to wonder what good news it is for anyone who has not already made it in the eyes of the world.

But the truth remains: the good news (the word Isaiah uses in his description of the Messiah) is the good news that liberates all it touches from the way things are to the way that things should be. Isaiah makes this clear and Jesus declares it to be so. It declares release for those held captive be it by their choices, the systems that are or simply the powers that be in the world. It provides healing for the broken hearted who cannot quite seem to get the world right. It sets free those who are held in the all bondage of every description. We must recognize that time and again that the gospel must always push us past good news for us; good news for those that look, act, and function like us and for us, but always pulls us toward the rest of the world as well. A gospel that does not declare the healing of the very present ills of the here and now cannot be the gospel in its full and is not the gospel upon which we wait. When we begin looking for the Messiah that would confirm the gospel of power as opposed to the gospel of complete liberation and broad healing, we can begin to look for a Messiah that is no longer an accurate representation of the savior that we have. As we wait we must always seek the one who

lies at the center even when that one may well challenge the way that we think and what we are looking for.

All of this is true not because we are going to somehow bring it to pass by our best behavior or our good works. The good news is the reminder that the covenant between God and God's people—all of us, not just the select few—is alive and well no matter what. God does not forget. God does not give up. God is the one who will clothe all those who are on the outside with the righteousness that only God can bring. God is faithful. Isaiah writes these words of restoration and expectation to a people who has been in exile where the natural even expected response was one that likely thought God's promises vacant and the covenant is null and void. Yet this turns out not to be so. The promises of covenant cannot depend on human capacity because, well, we are human and we know that we are not able to be depended upon. Instead, the promises are those that God makes and that God will see through. God grants the blessing. It is our invitation and privilege to be part of what God is doing and declare the working of the Gospel—all of it—is alive and well.

Jesus is the one on whom we wait; the one who declares these priorities of healing are priorities of God. This is the character of God on which we wait. This is the work of the world that we are invited to take up time and again. Amen.