

Sermon – December 13, 2020
“Oaks of Righteousness”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good Morning! Welcome, everyone, to in person or online worship. With the governor’s announcement of new restrictions, we are again looking at our Sunday worship and seeking to do what we can to ensure that we are worshipping in a manner that will keep safe and protected those who attend as best we can, based on our understanding of the spread mechanics of the COVID-19 virus. Please do not hesitate to look at the growing number of cases in Northumberland County yourself and decide if you need to step back from activities and join us online until the levels of new cases lessen once again. I want to emphasize that we will be wearing masks and keeping separation as key parts of our approach for responding to the growing numbers of COVID cases. And for those attending in person, let me encourage you to use the online registration that is available at vaumc.org.

Let’s take a few moments and celebrate some of the Charge’s recent ministry events. First, let me thank Len Novak for coming and sharing about the Gideons International this morning. We are humbled and blessed to have those who so diligently spread the scriptures across the globe to come and share this morning. I hope each of us will consider supporting the Gideons in their efforts. I am often blessed to receive cards noting the Gideons have given a Bible in my name. I can’t think of a better gift to give each other. Please consider a generous gift to support their work. I am still getting responses from people about the recent piano dedication at Afton. People are still watching that post on Facebook and being blessed by the hymns. Let’s again give praise to God this morning for all who participated. I have been greatly blessed by the Christmas decorations that are going up in the church and community. Praise God for those who take time to decorate their homes. And finally, the Bible studies at both churches are

continuing to be a blessing each week as we gather to look at God's word and discover new insights into living like Jesus Christ.

This morning's scripture might have a familiar ring to it as we have heard these words before. We have been using a form of these words from scripture for some time as our benediction. At the end of our worship time, these words are the basis for our being sent out into the mission of this church to the world. This morning, let me guide us through the benediction, and together let's see if we can better grasp what these words mean for us each week.

Let me start with what the prophet Isaiah wrote. This will be a reminder to us of the words the prophet received from God for the exiles in Babylon. Hear the first two verses of chapter 61 again: "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; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;" In these verses, Isaiah tells us he has been anointed with the spirit of the Lord God and sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up those who are brokenhearted, and to proclaim. The proclamations he is to make are liberty to the captives, release to prisoners, the Lord's favor, the day of vengeance of God, and comfort to those who are mourning. Isaiah has this prophecy in mind for those who were taken into exile. These words are good news for those whose lives are filled with the harsh, daily realities of exile. We do not look to that aspect of this prophecy for our benediction.

In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus begins his ministry, he goes to a synagogue, is given a scroll, stands up, opens the scroll to Isaiah 61, and shares these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus then rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, sits down, and tells those listening, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." If we are listening attentively, we will catch changes Jesus makes to what Isaiah wrote. Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy and we need to grasp what he changes, as his words are a more complete revelation of what God is doing for all people. One of the key phrases Jesus drops is the idea of vengeance. Jesus has not come for vengeance but for something else. Let's look at what Jesus includes in his words. First, Jesus tells us that the Spirit of the Lord is on him and that he has been anointed with the Holy Spirit. The idea of anointing in the Old Testament is

seen only with the anointing of those who would be king (David and Saul). Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist, and the Holy Spirit has descended upon him. Jesus is empowered through the anointing with the Holy Spirit to be in ministry. Jesus then tells us that he is to bring good news to the poor. The poor in the Gospel of Luke are not just those who are economically challenged. Luke's idea of who makes up the poor is all who lack the saving grace of Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus will have a focus on those with economic challenges, but his anointing includes those who are outside of the saving knowledge of God, those on the margins in the religious order of first century Israel. For Jesus, the poor are those who are considered outside of the kingdom because of their uncleanness, brokenness, or unworthiness. These are those the Law was being used to exclude from worship in Israel. Jesus changes this and includes in his ministry a focus for the widow, the orphan, the leper, the prostitute, the tax collector, the stranger, the alien, and any who are not seen worthy by those who have misinterpreted the scriptures.

Jesus has also come to proclaim. Say that word with me, church: proclaim. Jesus has come to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. Jesus has come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor! This is Jesus' ministry. As he stood to read from Isaiah, Jesus began to outline his teaching. Jesus will not only speak good news, he will be the good news to a lost world. Jesus will obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord, and go to the cross and die for our sins that we who are poor might become rich, that we who believe might put on a robe of righteousness through the grace extended to us. This is something we should all proclaim.

Now, we may recall that what we receive each week as a benediction is a little different from what Jesus reads when he is given the scroll of Isaiah. What we receive is "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission." If our ears are attentive to the words, then we will notice that instead of Jesus' "me," we have been hearing the collective "us." We who gather here are the body of Christ. We are to be Christ in this place, right here, right now. The ministry that Jesus had on earth is now for us to carry out as the body of Christ. We are to be those who are doing greater things than Jesus did. We are to be those who have come together for worship, are filled or refilled with the Holy Spirit, and then go out into mission with Jesus, working where he is already at work transforming the hearts of people.

We have been and are being anointed to bring good news to the poor. We are to take the good news of Jesus Christ to those around us who are poor, those who do not know the good news or have forgotten what the good news is for them. We are to leave this place and go forth into the world into Jesus' mission as a people guided by the Holy Spirit. When we walk out the doors from this sanctuary on the Sabbath, we are not leaving behind a sacred time and place. Instead, we are seeking to leave here refreshed, refilled with the Holy Spirit, and energized to be guided by the Spirit into Jesus' mission, into the places where Jesus is already at work transforming the hearts of the poor and waiting for us to go to be the eyes, hands, and feet of Jesus. We are to be sensitized to the voice of the Holy Spirit, open to being sent into Jesus' mission, obedient to that call, and guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring good news to the poor. The benediction is not so much an end to worship as it is a beginning to our entry into Jesus' mission. We are to proclaim release to the captives. This is the release from bondage to sin and death. This is entry into a new transformed life. We are also to help bring recovery of sight to the blind. We are those in the power of the Holy Spirit who can see those who are blind to the good news and are led to go and free the oppressed. We are to be those who are proclaiming the Lord's favor.

Isaiah, earlier in his prophecy, had called the people of Israel withering oaks that are losing their leaves. Now, with this new direction, with this new task to proclaim the good news, those who will accept this anointing and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit are to be called oaks of righteousness. Oaks are large trees with deep roots that are living for the glory of God and not for self. Oaks of righteousness are believers who drink in the word of God, give glory to God by their actions, seek to live lives that honor God, and love others. This is what we are to be in this community: those who are recognized as pillars of faith, those who are known for their righteous works and steadfast love.

We should ask ourselves if we are oaks of righteousness. Are we at work in the kingdom of God carrying out Jesus' mission to the poor in this place? What can we do to begin to enter into Jesus' mission this day as we leave worship? Let me suggest some ideas. First, pray. Ask the Holy Spirit to come, fill us up, and guide us to share the good news with others. We need to seek to be those who are hearing the prompting of the Holy Spirit and are guided to the poor Jesus wants us to be in relationship with each day of our lives. Next, we are to be those who are proclaiming the good news. Now, that may mean that you are to become a pastor and preach the

gospel, and if the Holy Spirit leads you there, then be open to that call. More likely, the Holy Spirit is seeking to guide us to use the gifts we have in our hand that we have been given for work in the kingdom of God with those around us. So, in this season of anticipation of the coming of the Christ child, give each other presents, gifts of love, because we have been given Jesus as our Savior. Then proclaim the word in any manner we are led. Give Bibles to those who are poor, decorate our homes with decorations that point to the coming of Christ. Share what those decorations mean to you with those in the places where the Spirit leads us. Wish people a Merry Christmas and lovingly share the good news of the season with them. Encourage each other to read God's word together, pray together, and proclaim the word together. As I drive around our community this season of the year, I like to look at the decorations. I am disappointed at how few nativity scenes I see. Let me encourage you, oaks of righteousness, to decorate your homes with a nativity set if you can and to be willing, open, and prepared to tell the children and adults who don't know what that scene means. Be prepared to proclaim to them the good news it represents. I have a growing concern that most people do not know and that the youth among us are not being taught what that manger with a baby means. Christ is coming. Proclaim the words of good news to the poor, you oaks of righteousness.

Pray with me: Holy Spirit, come and fill us anew this day. Give us refreshed hearts that will be open to your guidance to proclaim the word to everyone we meet. Give us eyes to see the poor and hearts to love them right here right now and to proclaim the word in any way and in any place we can. Amen.