



Sermon Transcript October 14, 2018

Hospitable God, Hospitable People Good News! The Transforming Power of Jesus! Isaiah 61:1-11

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 14, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Isaiah 61:1-11

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; 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.

Introduction

We are walking through Isaiah 56-66 and for many of us this is uncharted territory. It is the Old Testament. It is a prophet. It is a big book—66 chapters long. But hopefully you are discovering that Isaiah is very relevant and very contemporary, even though it was written 700 years before the time of Christ. In many ways, this third section of Isaiah is describing the day and age in which we currently live. It is a section of Scripture that reminds us that as the people of God, we are called to be God's servants in this world. But in order to be God's servants in this world, Isaiah is telling us that we need to reflect the righteous character of God. In other words, people need to see what Jesus looks like by looking at us. The church is the presence of Christ on earth.

This causes me to reflect and ask a few questions. Are we reflecting the light of Jesus by the way we live? Do people see Jesus through us? We know that we don't always shine the light of Jesus as we should. So how can we be that light that God has called us to be? Isaiah answers this "how" question, not just by what he writes, but how he writes it.

It is interesting how Isaiah structures Isaiah 56-66. He structures it like a staircase with a set of steps that go up one side and another set that go down the other side. Each step on either side is parallel to the other. But the step at the top stands alone.

The Anointed One	
61:1-3	
Glorious Zion	Righteous Zion
60:1-22	61:3-62:12
Divine Warrior	Divine Warrior
59:15-21	63:1-6
Unrighteous Israel	Unrighteous Israel
56:9-59:15	63:7-65:25
Righteous Foreigners	Righteous Foreigners
56:1-8	66:1-21

At the bottom step on either side you have this wonderful picture of foreigners coming to worship God. You find this glorious picture in Isaiah 56:1-8 and at the end of this section in Isaiah 66. In fact, Oswalt indicates that this third section of the book of Isaiah begins and ends this way to remind us why we are here as servants of God in this world. He doesn't want us to forget that the goal of our servanthood is that people from all over the world would be made righteous and that they too would enjoy and worship God.

Prior to this third section of the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah 40-55, we learn that we are saved—our sins are forgiven—by God’s grace. In Isaiah 52-53 we are introduced to “the Suffering Servant” who will atone for our sin through his own death. And so in Isaiah 55, we are told to come and freely receive the grace of God. You can’t earn it. You can’t buy it. You can only receive it by faith. And so some may conclude, “if I am saved by God’s grace alone and there is nothing I have to do to receive God’s grace, then it really doesn’t matter how I live.” Paul imagines the same question being raised in Romans 6. He asks it this way, “*Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?*” With very strong words, Paul responds, “*By no means!*” My loose translation of his response goes like this, “What are you nuts?”

That is what Isaiah is communicating to Israel in this second section of Isaiah, Isaiah 56-66. Now that they have tasted the grace of God, he calls them to “*Keep justice and to do righteousness.*” In other words, they are to shine God’s light through the way they live to the world around them. But they failed to be that light. To put it in our context, they would come to church on Sunday, but their Sunday had no impact on their Monday. They would go through their weekly religious ritual and at the same time oppress the poor, fight with each other, neglect the hungry and so on. Their own sin kept them from being God’s light to the world. So how can they be that light to the world so that others would come and worship their God?

It is here where Isaiah tells us about a Divine Warrior who will come and he is able to defeat sin in our lives and will enable us to stand our ground in this present darkness. As a result, we can become a glorious and righteous people that God uses to draw the nations to himself. They are drawn to worship God because they can see the difference that Jesus makes in our lives. That brings us to the top step, to the climax of Isaiah’s argument. It is here we discover how we can become that light to the world. It is through the transforming work that God produces in us through Jesus. This top step brings us to Jesus and it is a step that appropriately stands alone.

I have a few questions I want to ask Isaiah. Why does Isaiah go back down these steps on the other side? Why doesn’t he end with the climax of his point which is Jesus? Why does he rehearse again the points he already made as he made his way up the steps to Jesus? Why does he end with the righteous nations worshiping God? I think it is because he is reminding us why it is we are here this morning and why it is we exist as a church. It is easy to forget the goal. We occupy space on 511 Maple Street so that we can be a light to this community. The moment we forget that this is why we are here, we lose sight of what it means to be the church. It was mentioned in our community group

this past week that the church is like the moon. The moon has no light in itself. Rather, it reflects the light of the sun. When it is a full moon, when the earth—the world—does not obstruct the light of the sun, it lights up the darkness and all can see it. So it is with us. The point of our passage this morning is that Jesus comes to transform our lives so that we can be that light to the nations and so that others are drawn to worship God.

It is Jesus

First of all, how do we know that it is Jesus we find at the top of this staircase? Isaiah begins this passage by saying in verse 1, *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”* What makes us so sure that he is talking about Jesus here?

Well for starters, all throughout the book of Isaiah, we hear the prophet talk about a coming Messiah who will bring God’s justice and righteousness to this broken world. The consistent testimony about this coming Messiah is that he will be empowered by the Spirit of God to accomplish what only God can do—deliver and save his people from the brokenness of this fallen world.

In Isaiah 40-55, this Messiah is described as a coming “Servant.” He is introduced to us in Isaiah 42:1 with these words, *“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I put my Spirit upon him; and he will bring forth justice to the nations.”* This coming Servant will have the Spirit of God resting upon him and he will be empowered to bring about God’s righteousness to the nations. You see the same thing in Isaiah 11 where we are introduced to “the righteous branch that comes from the stump of Jesse.” Jesse was the father of David and David was promised that he would have a descendant who would reign over God’s kingdom with justice forever. Of course, Jesus is introduced to us in the very first verse of the New Testament as *“the son of David, the son of Abraham.”* What do we learn of this “righteous branch” in Isaiah 11? In Isaiah 11:2 we read, *“And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him . . . Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist.”* So when we come to the top of the staircase this morning and read, *“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; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God . . .* you can’t help but see that this passage also points us to the coming Messiah who is Jesus.

If the evidence from the book of Isaiah isn’t enough to convince you that we are talking about Jesus in this passage, the words of Jesus himself ought to assure you that it is Jesus

we find at the top of these steps. In Luke 4, Jesus enters the synagogue and he picks up the scroll and he reads from our passage this morning. *“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 the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* Jesus stopped right there, rolled up the scroll and said, *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* Jesus is claiming to be the very person Isaiah is writing about in Isaiah 61.

The word “Messiah” literally means *“anointed one.”* And once again, in Isaiah 61, we find that the “Spirit of the Lord” is upon him and he is empowered to bring about God’s favor to this broken world. Let me make a quick observation here that should encourage us. Isaiah 61:1 says, *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”* The task given is a divine task, but God supplies the power—the Holy Spirit—to accomplish it. He doesn’t give us a task to do without giving us the power and the authority to do it.

If nothing else, the way Isaiah arranges Isaiah 56-66, I think he wants us to look up and to keep our eyes on Jesus. There is no parallel step to Jesus. It is a step that stands alone. Jesus alone is worthy of our worship. God will accomplish his good purposes in this world through Jesus. And we will be used of God for good in this world as we keep our eyes on Jesus. The point Isaiah is making is that just as we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, we are also empowered to be used of God by grace through faith in Jesus. It is his light we reflect in this world. He is the one who transforms us. Keep your eyes on Jesus and he will transform your life from one degree of glory to the next.

Good News

Are you in need of good news this morning? Good “news” seems hard to come by these days. And yet, this passage is filled with “good news.” In fact, that is the first thing we discover about the work of Jesus in this passage. Isaiah says, *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”* I find it interesting that in Luke 4, after Jesus announces in the synagogue that he is the one Isaiah is speaking about in Isaiah 61, we hear Jesus say in Luke 4:43, *“I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose.”* What purpose? He says, *“He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

I was driving in my car this past week and I was listening to the radio and I came across a conversation on a Christian radio program. The question posed by the interviewer went something like this: “Is the God of the Old Testament the same as the God of the New Testament?” Some suggest that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and the God the New Testament has evolved into a God of grace. One of the main problems with this way of thinking is to suggest that God evolves over time in spite of what we read in Scripture that “God is the same yesterday . . . today . . . and forever.”

And yet, here we are in the Old Testament and we are reading about *good news*, about a God of grace. And furthermore, it is *good news* for “*the poor . . . the brokenhearted . . . the captive . . . the imprisoned.*” These words tell us something about the human condition. There is a sense of helplessness that comes with these words. Like the one trapped in poverty . . . or the one who has experienced the sorrows of life and is brokenhearted . . . or the one who is held captive and locked in prison . . . they can’t help themselves. Or as Paul says in Ephesians 2, “*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world . . . by nature, children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.*” Their need for help is total. They don’t need assistance. Assistance implies that you have something to offer. They need total help.

I like the way Oswalt describes it. “Who are the poor? Those who are so broken by life that they have no more heart to try; those who are so bound up in their various addictions that liberty and release are a cruel mirage; those who think that they will never again experience the favor of the Lord, or see his just vengeance meted out against those who have misused them; those who think that their lives hold nothing more than ashes, sackcloth, and the fainting heaviness of despair. These are they to whom the Servant, the Messiah, shouts ‘Good News!’”¹

We live in a broken world filled with pain. We fall victim to the brokenness of the world. But we also contribute to the brokenness of this world. The very things most people long for—peace, love, unity, justice, equality, relationship—seem to be the very things that allude us. There is even in the heart of man a longing for purpose and meaning and life beyond the grave—and for a connection to God himself. But where do I find this and how do I find this?

Scripture tells us that the answer you are looking for is right there at the top of these steps. It is Jesus! When Jesus read from the scroll, he stopped in the middle of the sentence. He stopped with these words, “*He has sent me . . . to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” He is not denying that the day of judgment—the *day of vengeance*—will

come against everything that is evil. We long for the day when wrongs will be made right and this world will be made new. But that is coming at his second advent. Right now, we are living in the day of God's favor. People all over the world are turning to Jesus as their Savior and Lord. He promises a peace that passes understanding. He fills us with a love that can even embrace our enemy. He gives us a longing for unity that embraces one another from other races and different backgrounds and nationalities. He brings meaning to our lives because we know that he is using us for good. He brings hope because we know that through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, not even death has the final word. He makes us secure because we know that no matter what comes our way, we are loved by God in Christ. We need not fear the boney finger of condemnation because the good news of Jesus is that on the cross he died for our sin. We are clean! There is no guilt! Hallelujah! This is good news!

Who is this good news for? It is for the one who *mourns*. Jesus says in verse 2, that he comes "*to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion.*" It is for the one who recognizes his or her need for Jesus and who repents of their sin. I wonder if there is anyone here this morning who is yet to turn to Jesus in faith and receive the hope of this good news. You can receive it today.

I love the first two questions of the Heidelberg Catechism. The first question goes like this. What is your only comfort in life and in death? I'll give you the short answer. It is Jesus. Jesus is your only comfort in life and in death. But the second question goes like this. What must I do to live and die in the joy of that comfort? The answer to this question has three parts to it and if you want Jesus in your life, then you need to embrace each of these statements.

- I must know how great my sin and misery are. In other words, you must embrace your spiritual poverty and that you have nothing to offer God. So like our passage says, you come humbly and mourn over your sin.
- I must know how I am delivered from my misery and sin. Our passage points us to Jesus as the answer. Through his work on the cross, he binds up the brokenhearted, brings liberty to the captive and opens the prison doors for those who are held captive by their sin. He takes those who are sitting in ashes, mourning and of a faint spirit and he puts on them a beautiful headdress, fills them with oil of gladness and puts on them a garment of praise. In other words, he transforms your entire life.

- I must know how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance. This is the part that gets missed at times. I think it is part of the point Isaiah is making as we start going down the other side of the staircase, directing our attention once again to our role in reflecting the righteous character of Jesus so that others may come to know Jesus. In other words, we now live for Jesus.

Priests and Ministers

When we consider this passage, it is possible to stop short of what Isaiah wants us to see. We climb this side of the staircase and we get to the top—we get to Jesus—good news—and we just want to stay there. But there is a whole other side of the steps that we are called to go down and it is set of steps that take us out into the world to reflect the character of Jesus so that others might come up these steps and find the favor of God.

There are two words pictures that bring our calling to light in this passage of Isaiah. First of all, he calls his people *oaks of righteousness* at the end of verse 3. He says, “*that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.*” What is interesting about this word picture is that all the way back in Isaiah 1:30, the sin of Israel is likened to an oak tree whose leaf withers and dies. And now, with the Lord, they are likened to a large majestic oak tree—stable, permanent and abundant. It reminds me of Psalm 1 and the person who delights in the law of the LORD. “*He shall be like a tree, planted by the streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, his leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.*” Basically, what Isaiah is saying here is that through the transformation that Jesus brings to our lives we are like *an oak of righteousness*. We become a visible display of God’s righteousness and God’s beauty. He actually comes out and says that in our passage last week. In Isaiah 60:9 he says that “*he has made you beautiful.*” We become a mirror of Jesus to the world.

So as we keep our eyes on Jesus and come back down these steps and into this world, it is our prayer that others might see the change in us. May we bring the fragrance of Jesus wherever we go. May Jesus be seen in our countenance. May Jesus be heard in our words and in our tone of voice. May Jesus be heard in our song and in our joy. May Jesus be felt in our touch. May Jesus be demonstrated in our goodness. May Jesus be encountered in our prayers and the words of wisdom we offer.

In fact, Isaiah picks up on this image in verse 6 when he calls his people “*the priests of our Lord*” and “*ministers of our God.*” A priest is someone who brings others to God. That is what we are called to do as we come down the other side of the steps. Lest you

think this is just an Old Testament calling, consider the image Peter gives for us, the people of God. He says in 1 Peter 2:9 that we are *a royal priesthood*. How should we function as priests in this world? He writes in verse 12, *“Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evil doers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation.”*

This is the thrust of Isaiah 56-66. We have been transformed through the power of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God proclaimed to us—a word that points us to Jesus. For what purpose? So that we when we die we can go to heaven? So that we can just hang out here at the top step and enjoy Jesus like we do each Sunday? While all that is good, we are sent down the other side of the steps so that we might bring heaven to others.

Righteous Worshipers

The last thing I want you to see is how this passage ends. It is a great ending and these two verses would be good verses to memorize. Starting with verse 10 we read about the impact of the good news of Jesus when it is applied to our own life. *“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.”* It is a great verse that speaks to the wonderful transformation that God works in our life through Jesus.

But then notice what it says in verse 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.”* I love the confidence we gain from this verse. It is God who is causing *“righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.”* It reminds me as I come down the other side of the ladder that I am not being called to make something happen. Something is already happening. We live in the day of God’s favor. God is at work in this world. He is making people righteous through the work of the Spirit and the proclaiming of good news and he is adding to the number those who coming to the top of the steps to worship the living God.

But we get to be part of what God is doing. We too have been empowered by the Holy Spirit. In what way do you need to come down the other side of the steps and step into this broken world? You can take the step of praying for the filling of the Spirit that you might reflect the character of God. You can take a step with your community group, knowing that we don’t do this alone. You can take a step on your knees, praying with

faith that God can use you to bring the presence of Jesus wherever you go. You can take the step of being conscious that wherever you go you bring the presence of Jesus and you can ask for God's grace to reflect his light. You can take the step of saying something, caring for someone, pointing someone to the top of the steps—to Jesus. You can invite someone into your home and let the light of Jesus shine. Whatever we do, Isaiah is telling us to not lose sight of the fact that Jesus has come to transform our lives so that we can be that light to the nations so that others would be drawn to worship God,

Conclusion

Use our final song as a prayer of commitment. It is a song that reminds us that Jesus will make all things new. He has made us new. He wants to use us so that others may be made new. And someday, this world will be made new. I invite you to take a step this week into the world where God leads you and do so with confidence. You bring the light of Jesus wherever you go.

¹John Oswalt *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 565

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. How long have you lived where you live? What do you like the most about where you live? Is there anything you don't live about where you live?
2. What challenges do you face and what opportunities do you have in extending hospitality to your neighbors?
3. What did you take from the sermon on Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Isaiah 61:1-3. How does this passage describe the transforming work of Jesus? What in this passage describes the transformation Christ has brought in your life?
5. Read Luke 3:21-22; Acts 1:8; Ephesians 5:18; Galatians 5:22-23. How do these passages help us understand how God shines his light through us?
6. Read Isaiah 61:4-6 and 1 Peter 2:9-12. How do these verses help you understand our calling in this world? What steps can you take to live out your calling?
7. Read Isaiah 61:10-11. What personal encouragement do you get from these verses? How do these verses give you confidence to participate with what God is doing in the world?

Taking It Home

8. What is one thing you are taking with you from your discussion?
9. Can you identify a "neighbor" that you would like to become a "friend?" What step would you like to take this month to make that happen?