The Rev. Andria Skornik

Sermon for Advent III

December 13, 2020

Anointed for this Moment

The Christmas movie *It’s a Wonderful Life* tells the story of an optimistic and ambitious young man named George Bailey. He has all these dreams for his life and the talent to pull them off. But one by one those dreams get put on hold as he sacrifices for other people.

With each setback, George stays upbeat. But finally, when a large sum of money is stolen from the Building & Loan he runs, and it looks like he might go to jail with the town being left in the hands of the corrupt Mr. Potter, it’s all too much. George hits a low point where there is no optimism left. Unable to see the good anymore, feeling like all of the work and sacrifices have been for nothing, he’s ready to give up.

If you watch the movie, you know how heavy that low point is — what it’s like to watch George’s relentless spirit finally ground down. It’s the kind of heaviness I imagine was in the air where our reading from Isaiah picks up.

Now just prior to that moment in the story, some good things had happened for the people of Israel. They had been freed from their exile in Babylon by Cyrus the Great. He let them go back to Jerusalem. He even gave them money to help rebuild the temple. Things were looking up.

But things didn’t go as they had hoped. All of those dreams they had for their return were not panning out. Things were in ruin. The rebuilding was met with resistance. There was frustration and humiliation as they weren’t able to get the city and the temple to match its former glory. There were also religious and political factions to contend with. In short, Jerusalem was turning out to be nothing like the restored city that they had hoped for; nothing like the righteous community that the prophets proclaimed and that they envisioned for their return.

And it is to this group of hurting and hopeless people that God sends God’s anointed one. In Isaiah it says that God’s anointed one comes to bring good news to the oppressed; to bind up the brokenhearted; to free the prisoners; to comfort those who mourn; to trade the ashes on their heads — signs of humility and grief — with garments of celebration. The anointed one comes to change the way the people see themselves. Not as the humiliated and dispirited people they are, but rather as they are described in this morning’s psalm: as those who dream again, whose mouths are filled with laughter and whose tongues are filled with shouts of joy.

The prophet says the anointed will come and do this for the people. But then it shifts to what *they* will do. Having been ministered to in this way, the people will repair the ruined cities. They will rise up from the former devastation. They will be able to do what has previously been too difficult: to rebuild Jerusalem as a city where righteousness and justice flourish.

As we read the Isaiah passage, the parallels with where we find ourselves today are many. Like the people of Israel, we’re about to enter a time of rebuilding. A successful vaccine signals that our exile may soon be over. In fact, I saw that the trucks with the vaccine left the Pfizer facility this very morning. We celebrate this, but we do it knowing there’s a long road ahead. When Isaiah speaks of the ruin of the city or the devastation of generations, I’m sure we all have present day images that come to mind. Things we look at and wonder, how is this going to be repaired? We also go into this next chapter of rebuilding with little reserves. And just as we see with the people of Israel as they sought to pick up the pieces, there will likely be discouragement, division, and the temptation to give up.

But this where our work comes in. In the Isaiah text it talks about God’s anointed one coming to the weary — those whose optimism is shot — and imparting blessing and goodness, radically changing how the people see themselves and the situation. What if that is the role we’re being called to right now?

Just think of how in Jesus’s day he got up in the temple and read this very scroll. Not just relaying the words on the page, but proclaiming it for himself and for his people.

Saying the spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring good news; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives. Which is exactly what he did. And he revived the people and reconnected them with God’s vision for them.

Jesus was anointed for this time. But he was also trying to help us see that what he was doing wasn’t meant to end with him. We are ALL called to get up and read that scroll.

Like the anointed one in Isaiah God’s spirit is upon us for this very moment. In this time, in this year, in this place, *we* are the anointed ones. We are the one’s God has sent to speak words of life to one another; to heal one another; to free one another; to revive those who are weary; to trade the ashes on people’s heads for garments of celebration.

In this time when the temptation to give up is real. When it’s hard not to become bitter or pessimistic. To attack one another. To think, we’ve been here before, why would things change now? Or to feel like we’re never going to get there. This is when our ministry to one another is crucial.

We need to come around one another with God’s words of life, and help one another imagine what these visions of God look like for us. It’s like in the movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, God’s messenger the angel helped change the way George saw himself and his situation and then his community came around him in a healing way; igniting his passion for life and his hope for his town once again.

Right now so many people are needing someone to heal them and hold them and help them get back up again. That’s what God has done for us. That is what we get to do for others. So that *they* can repair the ruined cities. And rise up from the former devastation. And rebuild loving, godly cities where righteousness and justice flourish.

In the long road ahead, we are called by God to do a healing, encouraging work. What would it look like for us to get up like Jesus and read this scroll for ourselves? What would it look like to proclaim it over our cities? To get up and speak these things to the ruins and to the broken hearts? The spirit of the Lord is on us! How exciting is that? To get to be the ones to help people dream again.

There is a long road ahead, But the signs of devastation, ruin, and brokenness are not forever. They are what God has anointed us for.

Amen.

Influential Sources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent-2/commentary-on-isaiah-611-4-8-11-5>