

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent: Called to set things right!

Followers of Jesus are invited to participate in justice, not just charity.

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-9

Rev. Steve Filyk

December 11

Advent Candle: People in Darkness vs 4 [124] (no slides—hymnal 124)

Opening Hymn: Joyful, joyful [410]

Choruses: Here I am to worship, Everlasting God,

Closing Hymn: Come, thou long expected Jesus [110]

Third Sunday of Advent

Christmas is commonly associated with acts of charity.

Think of "A Christmas Carol" and those two men

Approaching Ebenezer Scrooges about donations

For the poor and destitute,

For those lacking common necessities

And in need of common comforts.

Think of the Salvation Army and its Christmas Hamper program.

Last year we sent people out shopping for families

Affected by the flood in Merritt.

Every child in each family received \$125 in gifts.

For food the family received a \$75 President's Choice gift card.

Christmas is commonly associated with acts of charity.

That is giving others a morale boost

during a festive season.

But is charity as it is commonly understood,

what we connect the incarnation with?

Is charity what we are looking for in Jesus' triumphant return?

Is charity the church's central calling

when it comes to human need?

What about all the greater issues around human flourishing?

What about the mental health crisis in our nation?

Or the trafficking of young women for sexual purposes?

Or what about all those situations

of armed conflict and disease and deprivation abroad?

Could it be that these are the real issues

That Christmas is all about?

PAUSE

Today's lesson comes to us from the book of Isaiah.  
 It is linked to others passages in Isaiah,  
 Passages know as the 'Servant Songs'  
 (42:1–9; 49:1–6; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12).

Passages that either describe  
 or give voice to a special servant of God.

You heard this at the outset of today's reading:  
 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
 my chosen one in whom I delight..."<sup>i</sup>

Isaiah won't tell us who this servant is.  
 Instead, while speaking in a prophetic voice,  
 the writer describes the servant's character and mission.

So how is that servant described?

The servant is one who is filled with divine power.  
 "I will put my Spirit on him..." says the Lord.

The servant is also described as gentle and kind.  
 "A bruised reed he will not break,  
 And a smoldering wick he will not snuff out."

Finally, the servant is spoken of as persevering.  
 The Lord says that "he will not falter  
 Or be discouraged.

This is what we learn about the character of this servant.  
 One who is spirit-filled, non-violent, and steadfast.

But the Lord also declares this servant's mission.  
 The servant is tasked with pursuing a universal justice,  
 That is fairness and uprightness throughout the entire earth.

The Lord underscores this global mission  
 By stating it three times:

"he will bring justice to the nations...  
 In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;  
 He will not falter or be discourage  
 Till he establishes justice on earth."

The word behind the English word justice is 'mishpat'  
 This word occurs "more than 200 times in the Hebrew Old Testament.

Its most basic meaning is to treat people equitably.

It means acquitting or punishing every person  
on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status...

But mishpat means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing.

It also means giving people their rights.

Deuteronomy 18 directs that the priests of the tabernacle  
should be supported by a certain percentage of the people's income.

This support is described as 'the priests' mishpat,"  
which means their due or their right.

Mishpat, then, is giving people what they are due,  
whether punishment or protection [and] care.<sup>ii</sup>

This is the sort of justice the Lord is speaking about.

But who is the servant that is described?

There has been lots of debate over this question.

Considering that the first audience of this message

Was a people in exile,  
it could refer to an Imperial ruler, perhaps Cyrus,  
Being co-opted by God's plan.

At the same time, given what we know of the original calling of Abraham,  
That promise that through him

"all peoples of the earth will be blessed",  
This servant could also be Abraham's collective descendants.<sup>iii</sup>

What is clear from the Gospels is that both Jesus and his church  
Has seen this passage speaking of him.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus formally begins his ministry

By reading this passage from the Isaiah scroll,  
stating that "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."<sup>iv</sup>

In the Gospel of Matthew following the account of Jesus' teaching

And healings the narrator states that  
Jesus was fulfilling the promise of Scripture  
made here in Isaiah.<sup>v</sup>

Both Jesus and the church have clearly seen Jesus

In the description of this servant.

Jesus brought justice to Israel  
But calling out the people's leaders  
And by helping those who had been knocked down.

[As an aside there is something incredibly beautiful about Paul's recognition

That Jesus was commissioned to Israel but at the same time  
Embodied its corporate identity.]<sup>vi</sup>

And Jesus was the fulfillment of this passage  
both literally and metaphorical.  
He opened eyes of a man born blind  
And gave sight to those who couldn't see him.

And he elevated those who had been excluded from society  
Both by healing their illnesses and forgiving their sins.<sup>vii</sup>

But Jesus ministry was local,  
And restricted largely to the people of Israel.  
So what are we to make of the promise  
That the servant bring justice to the nations,  
to the distant islands?

During advent we look back at the incarnation,  
The entrance of Jesus into history.  
During advent we also look forward to Jesus' return in majesty  
where he will finish what he has begun.

But during advent we also consider Jesus'  
Presence in and among the church in mystery.  
During advent we are reminded  
that we are called to serve Jesus' mission  
Even as we await his return.

When Jesus ascended (after his resurrection)  
The disciples watched as he disappeared into the clouds.

While they were watching  
Suddenly two angels appeared among them  
Asking "Why do you stand here looking into the sky?"

[That is] church's calling goes beyond looking and longing for Jesus.  
We are called to get to work,  
So God's will is done here  
As it is done in heaven.<sup>viii</sup>

This involves bringing in God's reign of justice.

This involves more than charity.

While charity responds to needs that are immediate  
justice responds to needs that are long-term.  
While charity addresses symptoms,  
Justice addresses causes.

Instead of just rescuing people out of a raging river,  
 We need to find out why they are falling into it,  
 And stop the people who are throwing them in.

This is a truism,  
 But where justice has been established  
 there is no longer any need for charity.

Of course, justice is a more difficult mission.  
 Charity is easier.

Think of those Christmas hampers we purchased last year  
 For the victims of flooding in Merritt.

There was a commitment of time and resources,  
 but that commitment was limited  
 and the result was tangible.

Now think instead of what it would be like to build a community  
 That is more resilient to flooding:  
     To ensure that affordable housing is available,  
     To ensure that buildings are insurable,  
     To ensure that trailer parks aren't established  
     In the flood plain.

This will take persistent work involving community and government.  
 It will undoubtedly take years, even decades.

So how is the church supposed to take leadership  
 In these sort of herculean efforts  
 that span years, not seasons.

A more resilient Merritt is one thing.  
 But how about creating a world where people  
 Aren't just one mental health episode  
 away from life on the streets.

Or a world where elected leaders can't get away  
 With waging war on civilian populations.  
     Or where our own nations legislators are as effective  
     in protecting the most vulnerable  
     (at least as effective as preserving  
     the interests of the strong).

How is this ever to happen through the efforts of the church?

It will happen only by the work of God's Spirit  
 Redirecting Christ's church towards justice.

It will only happen because the same God who created  
 The universe in all its complexity and brilliance  
 Is directing history and our very lives.

Isaiah tells us:

“This is what God the Lord says—  
 the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,  
 who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it  
 who gives breath to its people,  
 and life to those who walk on it:

“I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;  
 I will take hold of your hand...”<sup>ix</sup>

I will take hold of your hand.

God does take hold of our hands.  
 And through us missions of justice are established.  
 Most of you know about the work of the Mustard Seed  
 Down on Victoria street.

Listen to their work in the life  
 Of a man named Andy.

*More than two decades removed  
 from his time at the Aldergrove Community Secondary School,  
 Andy has graduated with his Dogwood Diploma in March  
 while living at The Mustard Seed Kamloops' Men's Recovery Program.*

*“It feels great to accomplish this... [he said]  
 It's something I've wanted to work towards for a long time,  
 so I'm ready to move onto whatever is next.”*

*After his mother died in Grade 8,  
 Gamble developed a drug addiction,  
 which led to him dropping out of high school two years later...*

[Just imagine the challenges faced by a young teen  
 Without a mother, say 30 years ago.  
 That boy would have been very vulnerable  
 And there are too many people ready to exploit vulnerabilities...]

*Gamble was accepted into Men's Recovery Program last July.  
 In November, he enrolled in the Continuing Education Street School Program –  
 one of many programs offered to clients  
 with desires to advance either work or school skills.*

*In a much smaller classroom than his high school days,  
Gamble put his nose down and went to work...*

*Now with his high school education behind him,  
he will apply for the welding program at Thompson Rivers University,  
as his one-year mark in the Recovery Program approaches.*

*Welding was a natural fit for him,  
as he has been doing maintenance work  
for The Mustard Seed as of lately,  
along with his work experience  
and career education classes through Street School.*

*What Gamble is happiest with  
is the fact that he finally completed his high school education  
and can move onto his next academic adventure.”<sup>x</sup>*

[Now I’m not trying to make you feel bad about  
Any acts of charity you’ve participated in this season.  
But I want you to know that  
Jesus is beckoning us into a deeper engagement  
With the world around us.]

God’s work of justice is occurring  
Slowly but surely in our community.  
Jesus leads his church by the hand into work  
That goes beyond giving people a morale boost,  
But addresses the chronic brokenness within our society.

Because of this:  
Eyes that are blind are continuing to be opened,  
Captives are being freed from prison.  
And many who sit in darkness are being released.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Isaiah 41:1 NIV

<sup>ii</sup> "Christianity and Social Justice: A further understanding of the Christian call to justice." 8 Dec. 2022, [www.radiancesf.org/christianity-and-social-justice](http://www.radiancesf.org/christianity-and-social-justice).

<sup>iii</sup> See Genesis 12:3 NIV

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 4:21 NIV

<sup>v</sup> See Matthew 12:17-21. Matthew references Isaiah

<sup>vi</sup> See Andrew H. Bartelt "Isaiah 42:1-9" *The Lectionary Commentary: the Old Testament and Acts* 336

<sup>vii</sup> Think of the healing of lepers, the restoration of tax collectors and prostitutes

<sup>viii</sup> Philip Yancey *Vanishing Grace* 112

<sup>ix</sup> Isaiah 42:5-6

<sup>x</sup> "Men's Recovery Programs." Mustard Seed, 9 Dec. 2022, [theseed.ca/mens-recovery-program](http://theseed.ca/mens-recovery-program).