



“Isaiah’s Peace: Playing Favorites”

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

When Amanda and I were looking for houses when we first moved to Dallas, we had no idea that wet bars in ranch houses were such a “thing.” Without exception, every house we looked at had a little nook with a pantry, a bar, and a sink. Most were tucked away behind closet doors, but as life so often goes, the house we ended up buying has a wet bar front and center between the living and dining rooms. Being that our need for a wet bar was rather slim, we decided to put that space to use for something of extreme importance... we turned it into a craft area. As many of you know, especially the ones of you that have received handmade jewelry, carefully crafted creations, and colorful pictures, the Gregg girls love to do arts and crafts. There are times when Annaleigh will sit at the dining table and draw pictures of fairies or write full stories about loveable animals for hours on end. Bea likes to cut yarn into tiny pieces and use it to create collages. As you may have already guessed, the “craft bar” is the messiest area of our home because our girls’ imaginations explode with ideas and designs.

One of the hardest materials to manage totally in the craft area is the crayons and colored pencils. We have a lot of crayons and colored pencils. They are all different sizes and colors. Some are sharp and some of them are a little dull. Some have strange-sounding European names. Some are brand new and some have been around for a long time. The wrappers on some of them are fresh and clean while others are torn and dirty. Some are brand new while some have broken leads. Some are unblemished while others are used up. It is easy to see, that even with all that diversity, that every single color, each and every one, is used to create beautiful and thoughtful masterpieces.

As I read and studied this poetic text of Isaiah proclaiming the good news of God’s favor, I looked over at the crayons and colored pencils sitting on the craft bar and recognized that even though they have a lot of differences, they all have a purpose. They all have a job to do and they are all important for creating the beautiful picture of creation, the wonderful world that God desires. One is not better than another. The girls don’t favor a certain crayon or colored pencil over another. And I am reminded that in the second chapter of the book of James, the author pronounces that the followers of Jesus should not show favoritism. He said, “My friends, if you have faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, you won’t treat some people better than others. Suppose a rich person wearing fancy clothes and a gold ring comes to one of your meetings. And suppose a poor person dressed in worn-out clothes also comes. You must not give the best seat to the one in fancy clothes and tell the one who is poor to stand at the side or sit on the floor. That is the same as saying that some people are better than others. If you treat some people better than others, you have done wrong, and the Scriptures teach that you have sinned.”

We all know from our own personal experiences that “playing favorites” rarely has a positive connotation. When we start playing favorites, someone gets special privileges and someone gets left out. It can inflict unrest in any context, creating chaos at work, hard feelings among friends, and strife in the home. I am aware that when I pay more attention to one of my daughters over another that the one left out feels sad and frustrated. We all know that playing favorites is clearly unfavorable. But, it would seem that at the heart of the Advent message and at the center of this Isaiah text is the idea that God indeed plays favorites. During Christmas, we see in the story of the birth of Jesus that God chose a family to bless in a special way above all other families. And that family was blessed because God chose a small group of people to liberate so as to be unique above all other peoples. God chose a nation to honor as a favorite possession treasured above all other nations. It sounds to me like God is playing favorites.

Even the angels themselves, the ones proclaiming the birth of the Christ-child in the classic story of Jesus’s birth in Luke, chapter two, make the announcement, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!” Is God playing favorites? To answer that question, I think it’s important at this point to ask on whom does God’s favor rest. Does God’s favor rest on just the few, only the chosen, only the righteous? Does God’s favor rest on the kings, the rulers, the rich, and the strong? Or does God favor the brokenhearted, the imprisoned, and the poor as it says in Isaiah?

Seminary professor, Scott Bader-Saye, contends that the mission of God as proclaimed by Isaiah and our own Advent purpose is to turn our attention to those who are named as the recipients of the good news: the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, the mournful, the faint of spirit... the lowest and the weakest. He says, “In order to participate in God’s mission of restoration, the people of God are sent first to those who most need to hear that God will provide from them and will redeem their losses. Our [Advent] mission is not primarily something that goes out from God’s people – by sending money or sending missionaries – but something that defines God’s people, as existing for the sake of the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and mournful.”

We see that Jesus also participated in that mission from God. He knew that Isaiah’s words of anointing and transformation were not only for Isaiah’s time when Jerusalem was being rebuilt after its destruction or when the people of God finally returned to the Holy City after a lifetime of exile. Jesus knew that transformation needed to happen now. He repeated Isaiah’s words in the Gospel of Luke after entering the Temple. He unrolled the scroll and proclaimed the year of the Lord’s favor, when those who were left out, down and out, put out, and cast out were finally going to be transformed and restored. Jesus announced that he would be the one to bring that transformation, God’s transformation, to a broken world.

Advent reminds us that Jesus’s mission and message is being born again for us, today. We are called to put ourselves in this Isaiah text, to identify ourselves as the prophet proclaiming Isaiah’s peace. “The spirit of the Lord God is upon ME, because the Lord has anointed ME, to bring the good news.” We are all called to be a transformative presence in the world. That is our mission as Advent people. And, of course, it is easy to see the transformation of the physical world around us during Christmas when gifts are being wrapped, lights go up on the houses and businesses, the smells of holiday treats permeate the air, and the Christmas music, parties, and

pageantry fill up our senses and our schedules. But even amid the greenery, the candles, and the ornaments right here in our sanctuary, it is often difficult to follow Isaiah's words for today, to see the "righteousness and the praise that will spring up before the nations." The mission of Christ is something that the Isaiah text challenges us to ponder on this third Sunday of Advent. "We do not need to look too far to see the injustice of poverty, abuse, hunger, oppression, and war. Yet, our Christmas distractions often speak louder than Isaiah's call for God's transformation. Our eyes tend to drift away from the biblical text, and Isaiah's words fall on deaf ears. Jesus speaks the words of Isaiah again as a reminder that God's advent is a transformation that will alter our personal lives and the world in which we live."

Advent is more than a time of silent, selfish waiting when we tend to forget those whom the Lord favors. Who does God want us to value this Christmas season? What if we took Isaiah's call of peace and Jesus's mission to heart and we brought the good news of hope and restoration to those who have severed relationships, hidden addictions, debilitating depression, and awful fear? What if we spoke a good word and lent a helping hand to the people refused a room at the inn of privilege, the forgotten elderly, children without healthy food, refugees from war, and the hurting homeless? Have we not been anointed to bring the good news to even these?

Often when we bring the good news to a broken world, it can be scary, divisive, and harsh. But, as Flannery O'Connor once wrote to a friend, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful." It is tough to rebuild from the wreckage. The words of Isaiah remind us that from the ruins comes reformation, from the manger comes salvation, and from the cross comes a gift of love. Presbyterian pastor, Cynthia A. Jarvis says, "The God who can build up ancient ruins is also the God who can redeem the ruin a prodigal son believes he has made of his life; the God who shall raise up the former devastations is also the God who means to pick up a daughter's [brokenness]; the God who shall repair the ruined cities and the devastations of many generations is also the God who can repair even the ruined nation that has forgotten its way in the world."

But we must remember, we are not only agents of God's transformation, bringing the good news to the broken-hearted, we are also the objects of God's restoration. We all need mended hearts, we all need to be released from that which binds us, we all need to enrich our impoverished souls, we all need relief from the grief and mourning in our hearts. We all need transformation... we all need the good news. And we will find it with a favored holy family, in a manger, under a star. And the birth of Jesus tells us that the good news has not only come for God's favorites. No, God's pronouncement of peace on earth was delivered by the angels to lowly shepherds and by a star to the magi. The birth of Jesus revealed that God favored all of creation as angels, shepherds, kings, and animals alike heard the good news. It was a message for all!

The message of good news this Advent is to declare the year of the Lord's favor, the year of Jubilee, which in Hebrew culture was when all debts were cancelled and all property was sold or mortgaged and returned to the original owners. Isaiah's peace reminds us that in the year of the Lord's favor, God comes to set right everything that has gone wrong, to redeem everything that is undone, to rebuild everything that was in ruins. Now is the time of the Lord's favor when it is possible for all people to thrive. Now is the time when God's peace defines life for all people.

It seems to me that we all long for that kind of peace, for that kind of acceptance; acceptance that is complete and unconditional. Any kind of “playing favorites” hinders the good news of God. We’ve all been on both sides of that game, and we’ve seen how much harm it can do. We’ve all been the favored child and experienced the false sense of privilege and entitlement that goes along with that. We’ve also been the disfavored ones and experienced the humiliation and the pain of being rejected. So, for me, the suggestion that God would somehow play favorites with anyone is harsh and extreme.

And that is why we should lean into Isaiah’s peace and be an Advent people and a good news church. Like the crayons and colored pencils used in the creating of the portraits of joy and life, the people that make up this church, this city, and all of creation come in all sizes and colors; some may have strange-sounding names; some are old and some are young; some still feel sharp and new and some others feel used-up and dull; some are dressed in very nice clothes while others may wear clothing that is a little tattered and torn. But we must be careful not to show favoritism in our church and in our world. We are all God's children whether we are rich, poor, gay, straight, broken, whole, red, blue, brown, black, or white. We are all favored because we all need the good news of the gospel! And the good news of the Christmas Gospel, of this Advent season, is that since Jesus has indeed come and will come again, we are all – with no exceptions – God’s favorites.

Amen.