

“Delivered for Deliverance”  
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
Isaiah 61:1-11 & Luke 4:16-21  
December 11, 2016  
Third Sunday of Advent

In January of this very strange year, David Bowie died. One of the more surreal moments of his fairly surreal career came in 1977 when he appeared on Bing Crosby’s “Merrie Olde Christmas” television special. Maybe you watched that when it aired, or perhaps you’ve seen the clip on YouTube. David rings the door bell and Bing lets him in. Bowie mistakes Crosby for the butler, and then they work through some scripted banter about what their families do for Christmas. Noticing some music on the piano, they begin to sing “The Little Drummer Boy,” along with a song called “Peace on Earth” - a counterpoint composed for the occasion because Bowie apparently hated “The Little Drummer Boy.” The result is haunting and beautiful and strange. When it was released as a record in the early 80s, it became one of David Bowie’s best-selling singles of his career.

“The Little Drummer Boy” was first recorded in 1951 by the Trapp Family Singers. I think that song has remained a favorite Christmas song because it puts the singer and the listener in the position of having to figure out how to respond to the birth of the Christ child. I invite you to hear the lyrics without all its *pa-rum pum pum pums*:

Come, they told me  
Our newborn King to see  
Our finest gifts we bring  
To lay before the King  
So to honor Him  
When we come  
Little Baby  
I am a poor boy too,  
I have no gift to bring  
That's fit to give our King

Shall I play for you,  
on my drum?  
Mary nodded  
The Ox and Lamb kept time  
I played my drum for Him  
I played my best for Him  
  
Then He smiled at me  
Me and my drum

It’s easy to imagine ourselves standing there with the powerful magi as they pay homage, and realizing the enormity of the moment: such distance traveled to encounter a simple family in a stable, and then these men bow down to this infant. Something amazing is going on, and the drummer boy feels inadequate to the scene. And then he offers what he has - his drumming - and the woman nods and creation, in the form of the animals, joins in the drumbeat. And the child smiles. *Pa-rum pum pum pum*

This God of ours enters our world and gives us the greatest gifts the human mind can comprehend - love and grace and freedom and life - and we wonder: how can we respond? We have no gift to bring.

This beautiful passage from Isaiah seeks to give us some answer. These verses come from the part of Isaiah that we think was for the people who had returned from exile. They had returned home.

Remember that this is the people of Israel - they had never really returned home before. They'd always been moving to a new place - *exodusing* somewhere or being exiled to somewhere else. When they stayed somewhere, they were overtaken by empire. For the first time in their story, they were going back. And they had returned to find their cities ruined...and they mourned.

So here comes the prophet declaring “the spirit of the Lord is upon me...God 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...to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn” and to boldly go where no one has gone before. I may have added that last part. It's quite the to-do list!

Clearly God's prophet is bringing healing from God. The world is about to turn. But the prophet quickly passes the baton. With all this redemption and restoration and deliverance that God's anointed one brings, the prophet then anoints *the people* and puts *them* to work. “They will be called oaks of righteousness.” Anointed by the anointed, they will carry the redemption forward. These ex-exiles will rebuild their cities. And they will be filled with everlasting joy. They will be seen as blessed. And righteousness and praise will spring up as a witness to all.

When God intervenes, you get to do some hard work, everyone will see in you what God has done, and you will praise. This all sounds pretty good, until you remember that prophets are never popular. Praising requires devotion and discipline and being willing to be seen as just a tad bit quirky. Being filled with joy and having everyone see God in you is a bit of a burden and it gets old fast. It is much more entertaining to be cranky and see if you can get anybody to feel sorry for you. And rebuilding a city that someone else destroyed is more than a bit unfair. And it's tough! Hey Isaiah, doesn't your God know that urban revitalization takes decades?

I remember the first time I toured Birmingham, when the chair of the Materials Engineering department at UAB pointed to a new building to distract me from an abandoned lot and said, “This city is on the cusp of being reborn!” My comment, under my breath, was: “It sounds like you've been saying that for awhile.”

Ah, but here we are, in a new day for Birmingham. There are complicated issues around it, of course, but revitalization can be done, it would seem. Yes, we can build up the ancient ruins. Yes, we can repair the ruined cities. Ah, but not only can it be done, it must. Thus says the Lord.

God anoints prophets and tasks them with huge to-do lists, and their prophetic imagination and proclamation launches a community into new life. The ministry of Isaiah is wild and provocative and world-turning, and it reverberates - *pa-rum pum pum pum* - and the evidence of the new thing God is doing is seen not in the words of one anointed but in the lives of a people anointed through him. They have been delivered in order to bring deliverance.

A few centuries after the return of the exiles, there was a bit of a ruckus at ol' First Synagogue of Nazareth. The hometown boy, Jesus, got up to be the reader and he found these verses from Isaiah and he read them and everyone nodded and he gave the scroll back and sat down to teach and his sermon started by saying “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Imagine if, in the middle of

the pageant we're about to enjoy, one of the kids stepped forward and said, "This scripture is true - and it's about me, y'all!" I can read the minds of several parents who are suddenly panicking: "Oh dear lord, that would be my kid. Oh please sweet lord baby Jesus, don't let my child do that today!"

We're going to look at this synagogue story more deeply in a few weeks, as we delve into the Gospel of Luke after Christmas. For now, I simply want us to think about how we are to respond when God sends the anointed one.

The prophet Isaiah brought those words, and Jesus declared them fulfilled. So again, the world is about to turn. The turning began with the simple family, ordinary folk struck by the most unordinary events. Everything is about to change, again. God's spirit will be upon us with good tidings of great joy and a long to-do list. Advent is a time to prepare for something big. Christmas is not the end of Advent, but instead the beginning of everything.

When God enters our world and gives us the greatest gifts, we will be launched into life. The ministry of Christ will be wild and provocative and it will reverberate and join more two thousand years of *pa-rum pum pum pums* that call us to share good news and to build up and restore and to rejoice and to witness and to praise.

We are not returning from Babylonian exile. It's not the Jerusalem renaissance we're being asked to invest in right now. We have to look around and see what communities are in ruin, where people are mourning, and where comfort is needed. We have to find our own oppressed and brokenhearted and captive souls. If we can't see them in 2016, I fear we'll never hear the drumbeat. We have to find our own ways to take on the jobs of oaks of righteousness, and then we've got to get to work.

For we too have been delivered in order to bring deliverance. We have been saved for salvation. We have been resurrected for resurrection work. We have been given life so that we may give life.

Everything is about to change for us. We wait, expectantly like Mary, for the world to be transformed through us. Amen.