

'GOOD NEWS TO THE OPPRESSED' CRIMINAL JUSTICE

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT, YEAR B

Lectionary Texts: Ps 126 Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11 Luke 1:47-55 John 1:6-8,19-28 I Thes 5:16-24

Focus Text: Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

¹ The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; [the LORD] 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; 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 provide for those who mourn in Zion - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display [the LORD'S] glory. 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.

⁸ For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed. ¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for [the LORD] has clothed me with the garments of salvation, [the LORD] has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

NRSV

Additional Texts

Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power preserve those doomed to die.
Psalm 79:11

Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.
Hebrews 13:3

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink" ... And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Matthew 25:34-37,40-43

SCRIPTURE COMMENTARY

by David C. Forbes, Sr., Pastor of Christian Faith Baptist Church, Raleigh

If ever there were a time when good news was needful and required, that time is now. And how timely that "good news" should be one of the motifs in this season of Advent, a time which brims with the announcement of good news! Help, hope, relief, advocacy and assistance are on the way!

What can we glean from scripture about those who languish, the oppressed, the captives, the prisoners and the inmates in our penal institutions? Are they not there, at least most of them, because of crimes they committed? Are they not receiving their just dues? What right have the incarcerated to sympathy, help, hope or relief? Is there a word in the holy writ? The Christian view holds that while deviant and unlawful behaviors necessitate corrective institutions, the Christian community is duty-bound to have active concern for the care, rights and welfare of those who are in society's custodial care.

The Holy Bible is replete with multiple indications of the intent of the Lord that those in stocks be regarded as brothers and sisters and members of the godly community. Indeed, the prophecy of the coming of Christ embodies such good news for the oppressed.

Isaiah 61:1-4, characterized in some commentaries as the Servant's Song, comes forth as good news to the ears of the captive. The writer lays claim that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him for cause. The Lord has anointed him to purpose: to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. This message includes proclamation of the Lord's favor, indeed, the brandishing of the day of vengeance of our God. Those who mourn are to be comforted, provision is afforded those in Zion, and godly sanctuary is assured. What a clear indication of the regard which the Lord extends to the oppressed!

Isaiah 61:8-11 gives clear indication that the Lord loves justice and justice advocacy. And the Lord hates robbery and wrongdoing and promises recompense appropriate to such carelessness. Those who proffer justice are promised by the Lord an everlasting covenant and blessings. Righteousness involves active care and love for God's people who include the captive and the oppressed.

Psalms 79:11 exhorts the people of God to hear the actual groans of the prisoners, indeed, in God's Name, to minister to those who are doomed to die. Hebrews 13:3 requires little interpretation: remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured (!!!). Believers are exhorted to live in the skin of those who are oppressed. For only by such association is one likely to promote the dignity and rights of the prisoner and thereby provide the proxy of a loving Lord.

A PASTORAL REFLECTION by David C. Forbes, Sr.

Sociologists have taught us to observe that all societies have a process of stratification, the arranging or dividing of people into classes, castes or social strata. Status is assigned to people based upon where they fall in such social arrangements. Certain rights and status are reserved, for example, for people who are rich versus those who are poor. The educated fare better than the illiterate. And historically, the person of white skin has fared better than dark skin folks. The rights and privileges given the general citizen are far superior to those afforded the person who is removed from society as a criminal, prisoner or inmate.

As Christians and followers of the Nazarene, Jesus Christ, there is a requirement and charge that we not be so earthly-oriented that we fail to take heed that God's way is not man's way. Scripture makes it patently clear that Christians, unlike culture in general, are called upon to love and

respect those who are temporarily stratified into penal categories. Every single inmate has been born into a family and has had siblings or friends. Each was organic to some community, some friendship network, and some neighborhood. Many, if not most, were self-respecting citizens and peopled our organizational, social and church life. But, due to some mistake, indiscretion, or in some cases, false blame and victimization, they now find themselves removed from society and bereft of full citizenship privileges, dignity, rights and community.

Scripture makes clear that while society deals punitively with the prisoner, Christians are asked to afford respect, dignity and fraternity to the captive. Indeed, reading of scripture makes clear that the Lord is on the side of the poor, dispossessed and oppressed. Luke 1:52 makes clear that the Lord rejects sole identification with the so-called powerful. "His mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation. He hath showed strength with his arm; he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He hath put down the mighty from their seats, and exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away. He hath [helped] his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy." Wow! What a God! And wow! What a challenge and opportunity the Lord has put before his people!

The response required by God of all redeemed is laid bare in the holy writ. Victimization and derisive treatment of the prisoner is not an option. In fact, the scriptures make clear that a major dimension of divine judgment will hinge on how so-called believers deal with the oppressed. "For I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing." That which was begun in God's creative act is not yet completed. And scripture provides a strategy by which believers may continue the work of bringing God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. Deliver me from the Christian who joins in the terror and taunting of the incarcerated. Deliver me from the Christian who sees no role for him/herself in being the hands and heart of God in ministering to our brothers and sisters behind bars or those whose liberty is abridged. Deliver me from the Christian who fails to acknowledge that but for the grace of God go I.

Extending the good news to the captives, then, is not just a good idea, it is an imperative. Every Christian and every church should at least struggle with how each might find a niche in active "gospel giving" to those of our community who are temporarily away from us. To what extent does Advent speak not only to those who can smell the advent wreath and hear the joyful bells and carols, but to those also whom the Lord appears to favor: the oppressed, the wounded and the captive?

For the believer, Matthew 25-34-37, 40-43 is especially instructive. This segment of scripture is "in the red ink", meaning that the writer seeks to report the words of Jesus verbatim. I have for some time called these passages the "final exam" of faith and judgment. These verses make clear that salvation is less about claim and more about what the believer is spurred to do in the name of Jesus. Giving food to the hungry is required. Slaking the thirst of our brothers and sisters is divinely indicated. Extending welcome and the right hand of fellowship to the stranger pleases God. Sharing our wardrobes with those without clothing thrills the Lord. Taking care of the sick is a divine requirement. And of the prisoner, Jesus says, visitation and ministry are required and divinely valued.

Every preacher and every consumer of the gospel preachment ought periodically read the Matthew 25 final exam and ponder, "Did I? Will I?" Will I hear the Divine Judge say to me, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

Let those with eyes see; and those with ears hear. The Lord yet cares for the sparrow and the least of these, including the oppressed, the captive and the prisoner. So ought you and I. May we all heed the word of the Lord. Amen.

WORSHIP AID – 'GOOD NEWS TO THE OPPRESSED'

Responsive Reading

The wind of the Spirit challenges us to change.
Give us courage to respond, O God.
The fire of the Spirit calls us to a passion for the kingdom.
Warm us and give us your energy, O God.
The breath of the Spirit offers us new life.
May we receive and live out the gospel in the world.
In a world where there is need and oppression, violence and alienation,
May we bring life and love, O God.
In a world where there is racism, hatred, and division,
May we bring unity and community, O God.
In a world where there is meaninglessness and emptiness,
May we bring purpose and hope, O God.
Lead us forth, Spirit of God, in joy and in faith, in truth and in freedom.
In ways known and unknown, may we follow. Amen.

(from Disciples Home Missions of the Disciples of Christ,
www.homelandministries.org/PublicWitness/CriminalJustice/WorshipMaterials.htm)

Prayer of Confession

Let us confess the secret sins in the hidden spaces of our lives, which hold us in fear and anguish, keeping us from God and from each other.

Let us confess the words of judgment we have withheld in our societies, the compromises we have made which allow evil to multiply, producing harvests of destruction and death.

Let us confess the complacency with which we live in disunity, the ease with which we keep our prejudices, refusing to be the one people of God for whom Jesus prayed.

God, from whom nothing is hidden and who knows the motives of our hearts, forgives us our sins and declares to us the joyful truth that we are a liberated people.

Amen.

(from *In Spirit and in Truth: A Worshipbook* [Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1991, pp. 15-16])

Suggested Hymns

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|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ✓ There's a Wideness in God's Mercy | UMH 121/CH 73/AM 78 |
| ✓ What Does the Lord Require | UMH 441/ PH 405/MW 695 |
| ✓ You Are Salt for the Earth, O People | NCH 181 |
| ✓ Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus | BH 77/PH 2/UMH 196/AM 103/MW 262 |

Additional Prayers

Bread and Justice

O God, just as the disciples heard Christ's words of promise and began to eat the bread and drink the wine in the suffering of a long remembrance and in the joy of a hope, grant that we may hear your words, spoken in each thing of everyday affairs:

w Hymnal Legend w

- † UMH – United Methodist
- † CH – Chalice Hymnal (DOC)
- † NCH – New Century Hymnal (UCC)
- † BH – Baptist Hymnal
- † PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
- † AM – African Methodist Episcopal
- † MW – Moravian Book of Worship

Coffee, on our table in the morning;
the simplest gesture of opening a door to go out, free;
the shouts of children in the parks;
a familiar song, sung by an unfamiliar face;
a friendly tree that has not yet been cut down.

May simple things speak to us of your mercy, and tell us that life can be good. And may these sacramental gifts make us remember those who do not receive them:

who have their lives cut every day, in the bread absent from the table;
in the door of the hospital, the prison, the welfare home that does not open;
in sad children, feet without shoes, eyes without hope;
in war hymns that glorify death;
in deserts where once there was life.

Christ was also sacrificed; and may we learn that we participate in the saving sacrifice of Christ when we participate in the suffering of his little ones. Amen.

(from Rubem Alves, Brazil: found in the United Methodist Hymnal, #639)

For Courage to Do Justice

O Lord,

open my eyes that I may see the needs of others;
open my ears that I may hear their cries;
open my heart so that they need not be without succor;

let me not be afraid to defend the weak because of the anger of the strong,
nor afraid to defend the poor because of the anger of the rich.

Show me where love and hope and faith are needed,
and use me to bring them to those places.

And so open my eyes and my ears
that I may this coming day be able to do some work of peace for thee.

Amen.

(from Alan Paton, South Africa: found in the United Methodist Hymnal, #456)

ADDITIONAL HELPS

Advent Material

Advent Hymns

- ✓ Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding TH 59
- ✓ Arise, Your Light Is Come BH 83/NCH 164/PH 411
- ✓ On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry PH 10/TH 76/LW 14/MW 267

Responsive Reading

For the one Who has come is mighty,
Holy is the name of the Lord.
The Lord has "scattered the proud," (Lk 1:51)
And has "exalted those of low degree." (Lk 1:52)
We rejoice in the coming of the Lord,
Who has exacted justice in the world for the downtrodden.
Amen.

(by Jason R. Jenkins)

w Hymnal Legend w

- † NCH – New Century Hymnal (UCC)
- † BH – Baptist Hymnal
- † PH – Presbyterian Hymnal
- † TH – The Hymnal 1982 (Episcopal)
- † LW – Lutheran Worship
- † MW – Moravian Book of Worship

Quotes

Justice in the life and conduct of the State is possible only as first it resides in the hearts and souls of the citizens.
Plato

Justice has nothing to do with what goes on in a courtroom; Justice is what comes out of a courtroom.
Clarence Darrow

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.
Martin Luther King, Jr.

Justice is itself the great standing policy of civil society; and any eminent departure from it, under any circumstances, lies under the suspicion of being no policy at all.

Edmund Burke

Personal Vignette

A New Life After An Unfair Sentence: Rev. Otis Hardy
(from www.exodusfoundation.org)

In June of 1979, I was sentenced to two life sentences for armed robbery, even though I did not carry a gun. The conviction for armed robbery carried more weight and heavier sentencing. The sentence was for two life sentences without eligibility for parole until 2038. Proverbs 19:21 says "Many plans are in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." I now know that God has a purpose for each one of our lives...

While I was doing time, I began to learn to bake in prison. In 1994, I was invited to church for the first time in my life. I converted and accepted Christ as Lord and Savior of my life through the persistence of a prison guard. Whenever he saw me, he used to say "Jesus Loves You." That bothered me so much. Slowly, I started to believe it was true that Jesus loves me. Before I became a Christian, I used to run the prison I was in. I would run all kinds of games. If I told it all, it would make church people stone me. But, when I accepted Christ, I was transformed.

In 1996, I was given a task of becoming the personal chef of Governor Hunt at the Governor's Mansion in Raleigh, N.C. This provided me with some freedoms and experiences I would not otherwise have had. I worked there for four years. I met Bill Gates, Jesse Jackson, Michael Jordan, Senator Jesse Helms and Billy Graham. It was soon discovered that the state of North Carolina was at error for the amount of time that I was convicted for; therefore, I was released on February 15, 2000 as part of a prison ministry program. I was given a check of \$45, and the check was cashed because I owed the state \$20.00. So, I left prison, after 21 years, with my life's savings of \$25.00 dollars.

Soon after, I married the most wonderful lady (saint) that I have ever known—Wynella. We are partners, and I am now a student at St. Augustine College. I finished my Bachelor of Arts Degree in Organizational Management in 2003. Today, the Lord has blessed me with the opportunity to be a national motivational speaker for youth and adults. I am also involved in many community-based programs such as the NC Oral Historical Society at UNC, Urban Ministries Christian Business Men's Association, and the Governor's Job Start program for Prisoners. In 2002, I was ordained as an elder by the Community of Christ. I do not belong to any one denomination. I work with all to the glory of God.

Contacts & Other Resources

- ✦ www.nccumc.org/CJMM - the Committee on Criminal Justice and Mercy Ministries of the North Carolina Conference, United Methodist Church
- ✦ www.exodusfoundation.org - the Exodus Foundation, a faith-based group that serves African-Americans who have been incarcerated or who are at risk for incarceration with a national community-based after-prison care program.
- ✦ <http://hrw.org> - Human Rights Watch, "an independent, nongovernmental organization" that stands "with victims and activists to prevent discrimination, to uphold political freedom, to protect people from inhumane conduct in wartime, and to bring offenders to justice."
- ✦ The Elephant in the Courtroom: Racism and Criminal Justice in North Carolina – an adult education curriculum resource provided by the North Carolina Council of Churches which explores themes of community, forgiveness, racism, and restorative justice. To request a copy, please send an email to nccoafc@ncccouncilofchurches.org.
- ✦ Thy Kingdom Come: A Call to Prophetic Ministry – a small-group study guide produced by the Office of Missions (NC Conference, United Methodist Church) in conjunction with the North Carolina Council of Churches. This guide discusses jobs and wages, health, education, housing, criminal justice, and other social justice areas. Accessible in a PDF format on the Council's website (www.ncccouncilofchurches.org) or via an email sent to the above email address.
- ✦ The Lost Generation Task Force – a Triangle-based, statewide group that seeks to understand and find remedies for the crisis of the disproportionate number of African-American men in prison. For more information, call Dr. David C. Forbes at 919-833-5834.

KEY FACTS

DID YOU KNOW?

- Q "According to the Bureau of Justice statistics, our nation currently incarcerates about 2,000,000 human beings. Of that number, African-Americans constitute anywhere from 45-70% of state and federal prisoners...In Mississippi, African-Americans are 75% of the prison population but only 36% of the general population. These outrageous disparities can be accounted for in part by the fact that efforts to reduce crime in the 1980's and 1990's were targeted at minority communities. Between 1985 and 1997, 75% of federal prison growth is accounted for by people of color. Forty-one percent of the growth came from the African-American community and 32% from the Latino community."¹
- Q In the state of North Carolina, approximately 25,000 inmates are released annually. After 2 years back on the street, the rate of recidivism is 46% - meaning that 46% of released inmates end up back in prison or jail. After 5 years, the rate of recidivism increases to 70%. Of the 25,000 inmates released annually in the state of North Carolina, 17,500 will end up back in

¹ From the Exodus Foundation's website (where specific sources can be found):
www.exodusfoundation.org/aacriminaljustice.htm.

prison in 5 years. Nationally, approximately 70% of all released prisoners return to prison as well.²

- Q One out of every ten Black American men between the ages of 20 and 39 is in prison. This 10% of Black men compares to 3% of Hispanic males and 1% of White males in the same age group.³
- Q Latinos currently comprise approximately 18.6% of American adults found in State or Federal prisons.⁴
- Q Native Americans represent less than 1% of the American population; of that, over 4% are under some sort of correctional supervision (compared to 2% of white, non-Hispanics).⁵
- Q According to the study, *The Relationship between Race, Ethnicity, and Sentencing Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis of Sentencing Research* (funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, December 2004), "African-Americans sentenced in State courts are generally punished more harshly than whites, independent of offense seriousness and prior criminal history."⁶ Earlier Federal data showed a statistically small effect of the influence of race on judicial decisions; however now – according to this more detailed and innovative study – "more recent analyses of Federal court data...reveal that the disadvantage experienced by African-Americans was considerably greater than in earlier analyses of Federal court data, and in these more recent analyses the influence of race (i.e., being African-American) is sizeable and statistically significant." Also according to the study, "analyses...found that Latinos in both State and Federal courts generally were sentenced more harshly than whites." In their concluding remarks, the authors maintain that "these findings undermine the so-called 'no discrimination thesis' which contends that once adequate controls for other factors, especially legal factors (i.e., criminal history and severity of current offense), are controlled unwarranted sentencing disparity disappears. Independent of other factors, minorities were sentenced more harshly than whites on average."⁷
- Q The average prison population for North Carolina in 2003 was 33,646 inmates, which was up 60% from 1993.⁸ Ethnic demographics for North Carolina in 2003 indicated that 73% of the general population was White and 22% African American. However, 60% of prisoners were African-Americans and 34% White.
- Q "Nearly half of North Carolina's prisoners were convicted of drug crimes and property crimes related to drugs. 67% are minorities, predominantly young, African-American men."⁹

² www.exodusfoundation.org/recidivism.htm.

³ From the United Church of Christ website, www.ucc.org/justice/cj2.htm.

⁴ www.exodusfoundation.org

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ojmarrh Mitchell and Doris L. MacKenzie, *The Relationship Between Race, Ethnicity, and Sentencing Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis of Sentencing Research*, December 2004; funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, 124. Accessed via the National Criminal Justice Reference Service's website, <http://virlib.ncjrs.org/Courts.asp>.

⁷ Ibid, 129.

⁸ NC Department of Correction, Research Bulletin, Issue No. 47, 25 March 2004; cited in *Fast Facts About Human Needs & Inequality in North Carolina*, published by NC Policywatch, www.ncpolicywatch.org.

⁹ North Carolina Council of Churches, *The Elephant in the Courtroom: Racism and Criminal Justice in North Carolina*, 8, citing the NC Department of Corrections Annual Statistical Report (2001), 18.