

Isaiah 61:1-3, 10-11 *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for 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 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor. . . . I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.¹¹ For as the soil makes the sprout come up and a garden causes seeds to grow, so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations.*

Freedom for the captive

1. The message
2. The joy

“Billy Lawrence learned the hard way what a precious thing freedom was. He learned by losing his freedom. From his jail cell, he could look out on the world. He saw the prison guards and other workers coming and going freely while he was imprisoned – for four years.

“On the outside, Billy had taken freedom for granted. He had been too free with his time, getting mixed up with the wrong crowd. He started with petty theft, then graduated to grand theft auto. Now his time was not his own. It would be two more years before he was eligible for parole. He would be 30 years old before he got out. What a waste!

“Billy missed his family, especially his mother. He would give anything to be with her now in their home by the beach. When he thought about it, he could almost feel the sun and the warm ocean breezes on his face. Instead, all he saw was the cold, dark, colorless cement walls of his cell. He yearned for liberation.” (Jacob Preus, Just Words, pp. 195-196)

You are Billy. Caught up in the prison of sin, Isaiah has a message to you today. He promises freedom for the captive.

Do you remember General Norman Schwarzkopf? He was the general who led the Desert Storm victory several years ago. He didn't have that important position because he decided to do it on his own. He was sent there by President Bush and the Joint Chiefs of staff. They sent him because they believed he was the best qualified to lead that effort.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. The one speaking in our text says he is anointed. That simply means he was commissioned. He was commissioned to lead the mission described here because he is the best one qualified. He is the only one qualified. In Nazareth shortly after his baptism, Jesus read these words of Isaiah in the synagogue. Then he said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21) He is the Commissioned One. He is the Anointed One. He is the Messiah, the Christ. He was sent to proclaim good news to the poor, to free the captives, to release the prisoners.

When God first created the world, everything was perfect. It didn't take long for Adam and Eve to crash into sin, marring God's Eden. In its place a scraggly, scrawny Gethsemane took root. People no longer loved God or their neighbor, only themselves. They long for compassion and understanding from others but didn't understand how to be compassionate themselves. They craved respect but only bothered to respect their cravings. They bickered, pouted, and lost their temper with their loved ones. They hated and schemed against their enemies and their enemies against them. Sin created a depressing world in which to live – a prison house of suffering, fear and death.

And that's why Jesus was anointed with the Spirit. *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.* In the novel, *The Haunted Man*, Charles Dickens tells the story of a man haunted by his terrible past. A ghost appears to him and offers to erase the man's memory. Of course he jumps at the offer.

If only it were that simple. If only we could say the word and all feelings of guilt, all memory of our past sins would be gone. But that doesn't happen. Those memories still come back and haunt us. That's why Jesus came. *He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives* – us who were captive to guilt and shame.

Did you notice the exchange in the text? Good news for poor. Broken hearts healed, freedom and release for captives. Comfort for mourners, crown instead of ashes, praise instead of despair. What we were, captives to sin; what we deserve, punishment in hell and despair – that was all removed and we were given freedom, comfort, praise and joy. A great exchange!

In the movie, “The Mission” Robert DeNero played a slave trading murderer who became a Catholic monk. Before he could be assured of forgiveness for his past sins, he was told to do penance. He penance was to pack up the weapons and armor of his past life and carry them in a bundle behind him as he journeyed into the South American jungle. He trekked through rivers, over rocks, up waterfalls and more. Once when he was struggling up a cliff with his bundle of guilt, a native came over and cut the bundle free, throwing it over the edge of the cliff. That is what God has done for us in Christ. Our past sins no longer follow us around. Therefore, neither should the guilt that goes with those sins. If you are carrying around a load of guilt, let it go. Stand at the cross of Jesus and know that Jesus thrown your sin over the cliff. It’s gone. What good does it do to carry guilt around anyway? It doesn’t make us more forgiven. It doesn’t undo the harm that our sins have caused. Refusing to let go of our guilt only makes us guilty of rejecting Jesus’ proclamation of freedom. Believe that Jesus as set you free and you are free indeed.

Then rejoice in that good news. Let us say with Isaiah, *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.* What’s it cost to own a piece of heaven? The cost is this: no smart-aleck comments about your teacher’s clothes; no sassy remarks to your parents; no cursing under your breath; no ignoring another person’s pain but doing something to alleviate the suffering. In short, the price tag for a piece of heaven is being unselfish every second of your life here. So, if you’ve ever ripped crayons out of the hand of a sibling, if you’ve ever bent the truth when speaking to a customer, if you’ve ever groused about having to get on your hands and knees to clean up someone else’s mess, you don’t have what it takes to own a piece of heaven. Instead, you’ve carved out a place for yourself in hell.

That’s why Jesus’ announcement is better than the credit card company calling you up in January to say that they have paid for all your December purchases. Jesus came to announce freedom from all our sin. On the cross he paid the debt of hell that we owe and gave us credit for his perfect life. In essence he’s telling us that all our future sins too have been paid for. Can you imagine life with a credit card company like that? Not only will they pay for the odd monthly bill, they have promised to pay for any future purchases you make! Would you ever again worry about not having enough money to pay the heating bill and put food on the table? Would you ever again stew about the cost of those car repairs? No! The credit card company will take care of those charges for you. That’s the kind of freedom from sin Jesus has won for us and freely gives us in the gospel.

May we stand firm in the freedom Jesus has won for us. *They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor.* How solid is your Christmas tree? If you climb on it, will it fall over? What about the oak tree in your back yard? The difference is one rooted, firm and solid. We are oaks of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. We stand firm in Jesus. Nothing can take that away. You are an oak of righteousness.

And with Isaiah, we can rejoice. *I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness.* Despite the filthy suits we inherited from Adam and despite the filthy garments of sin with which we have dressed our lives, we are given new garments of salvation. We are dressed in the best. With Martin Luther we can say, “Jesus, you are my righteousness; I am your sin. What you were not, you took; what I was not, you gave me.”

Christmas is less than two weeks away. Are you ready? Do you have the Christmas spirit? We spend so much dressing up our homes inside and out, what about ourselves? Through Word and Sacrament, let’s dress our hearts with the robe of Christ’s righteousness. Wearing those pure white garments, we are dressed for Christmas. We are dressed in the joy of salvation and we are wearing the clothes of praise.

After the sermon today, we pray for that joy. We have heard Jesus announce good news for the poor and freedom for the captive. So we pray that this message will fill our hearts with joy. Using the words of David from Psalm 51, we sing “Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with your free Spirit.” May we have the joy of salvation, the joy of captives set free from prison.

Billy Lawerence cannot be free. Even if he is freed from sin through faith in Jesus Christ, he can’t escape the consequences of his sins. Neither can we. But we are free from the punishment of our sins. We are free from the guilt of our sins. We are free to serve Jesus and we are free to rejoice in our salvation. May the Holy Spirit give you that joy today and always.