

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11. Context. The book of Isaiah falls into two main sections. The first (chapters 1-39) records the oracles and prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose ministry spans the second half of the 8th century BC (roughly 742-690). Starting with chapter 40 the text reflects the ministry of an anonymous servant who suffered and was killed in the closing days of the Exile in Babylon (around 539 BC), including an "epilogue" of sorts in chapters 54-66 that describe the struggles of the suffering servant's followers as the people return to Jerusalem and begin to rebuild. This week's reading is at the center of this last section. The (anonymous) speaker, one of the disciples of the suffering servant, announces his own calling from God: to proclaim God's salvation to those who have been committed to the vision of the suffering servant and have suffered for it – the oppressed, the brokenhearted, etc. – as an example to all the nations of God's faithfulness.

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he 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, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 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 his glory. 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.... 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. 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. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he 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. 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.

Reflection. The joy of the prophet in these verses is almost ecstatic: God has chosen him to be the bearer of unbelievably glad tidings to those who have been suffering and despairing under the weight of exile and injustice. God's plan for them is to restore them, so that they might become a light to the nations, a beacon broadcasting what it means to be blessed by God and how to live in peace and justice. In Luke's gospel, Jesus reads this passage in the synagogue in Nazareth at the very beginning of his ministry. Jesus extends the prophet's proclamation to all who despair, all who are oppressed. Of what do you despair, by what are you oppressed? God will help you bear the burden and bring you to a time of blessing that you can't imagine.

Psalm 126. Context. This week's psalm is taken from the midst of a collection of similar psalms (called "psalms of ascents:" psalms 120-134) that share the perspective of pilgrims "going up" to worship at the Temple in Jerusalem. In the opening verses of this psalm, the people recall the thrill of having experienced God's deliverance in the past; faced with a new crisis, in the final verses they seek God's help: restore our fortunes, O Lord... The Negeb is an arid, desert-like region, where streams flow only in the rainy season. The psalm reads like the community's response to the words of the suffering servant's disciple recorded in Isaiah 61. It is also the inspiration for the hymn, "Bringing in the sheaves."

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, "The LORD has done great things for them." The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced. Restore our fortunes, O LORD, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

Reflection. The psalmist expresses with joy the hope and confidence that God will do in the future what God has done in the past. It would serve us well as our daily prayer: rejoicing in God's blessings, while at the same time

recognizing the challenges that face us and seeking God's help and comfort. How does your daily prayer compare to the prayer of Psalm 126?

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I Thessalonians 5:16-24. Context. Paul's first letter to the Christian community at Thessalonica is the very first of his letters and the earliest document of the New Testament. It was probably written around 50 AD. Thessalonica was an important Roman city on the Macedonian coast. The growing cult of the Roman Emperor would have been an increasingly significant point of conflict between Christians and their neighbors, leading to discrimination, if not persecution. Paul recognizes that his hearers and readers are also caught up in the tension between the "already" of what God has done for them through Christ and the gifts and power of the Spirit that they have already claimed and experienced, and the "not yet" of the fulfillment and completion of God's love and power in their lives that they will only experience with the second coming of Christ. This week's reading gives a few of Paul's "rules for living" in the meantime.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Reflection. Just in case you didn't get the point of Psalm 126, here's Paul spelling out much the same thing: you can count on God's promises, so rejoice, pray, give thanks. Hold fast what is good and abstain from every form of evil. It won't always be easy: sometimes circumstances will seem overwhelming. But just as God gave Jesus life out of death, so God will do for you!

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John 1:6-8, 19-28. Context. This week's reading is John the Evangelist's account of John the Baptist. The account makes unequivocally clear that John's relationship to Jesus was strictly as a witness to him. The other gospels speak of John as "Elijah," a figure who would usher in the messianic age; but here the Baptist denies such an identity. "The prophet" refers to another messianic figure, one promised by Moses in Deuteronomy, where Moses says that God will raise up another "prophet like me" to lead the people – an identity which the Baptist also denies. An important historical point: in John's Gospel, "the Jews" most often mean the religious authorities, not the entire people. This is so largely because when the gospel was finally written down around 95 AD, Christians had been expelled from the Jewish community and no longer distinguished the leaders from the people. Moreover, the religious authorities of Jesus' day – Pharisees, Sadducees, etc. – had ceased to exist after the crushing defeat by the Romans in 70 AD. Neither did the priests and levites survive as authorities after the Temple had been destroyed. The names "cohen" (priest) and "levi" became family names, and continue to be used to this day, suggesting a link to that earlier time.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.... This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Reflection. In the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist's role is not so much to bring people to repentance as to point people to Jesus, and to reveal Jesus as the "Lamb of God." As we engage others who are unfamiliar with Jesus, our approach should not be "look what we're doing" so much as "look who we're doing this for." If what we do as Christians doesn't bring others to a knowledge of Jesus, we're only doing half our job!