

John Sampson
“Visions of Paradise”
Text: Isaiah 61:1 – 4, 8 – 10
Preached at KVCC
December 17, 2017

Will you pray with me?

God may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer. AMEN.

On this third Sunday of Advent, as we draw closer to Bethlehem and the hope of Christmas, the rubber begins to hit the road.

Because we begin to see what the coming of the Christ child may mean for us, what it may invite us to become.

We begin to see that the birth of the one called the Prince of Peace will require work and commitment from us, that we, each one of us, will be called to have a part in the building of nothing less than a new world, and where we already work towards creating a more loving and compassionate earth this birth might allow us to see how we can move to new levels of engagement and practice.

The passages I read from the book of Isaiah this morning are filled with “I” statements, statements said from the perspective of the first person. When I shared these statements with you perhaps you heard them as if they only applied to me, or maybe they applied to the prophet, or even that they were the words of Jesus telling us what *his* ministry on earth might look like.

But did you also believe that these statements to radical action applied to you, to all of us?

Because they do.

And that is what is so spiritually provocative about this morning's reading. These proclamations of radical action, which can turn the very definition of what Christmas means on its head, aren't shared with us so that we may passively consider them from afar. They are announcements of what the birth of Christ will look like in our own lives, in our own hearts, and in our own deepest beings. And they are the description of how this birth can revolutionize how we act and behave in our communities, and what we demand of each other.

They are nothing less than visions of what paradise could look like not in some perfect world of the future, but in the world of brokenness and conflict that is now.

But as I mentioned, perhaps Isaiah's words seemed distant and external, and that may simply be a function of how they were shared this morning.

So I will share some of Isaiah's verses again, some of the ones that are "I" statements. But this time, after I read aloud these statements, I invite each one of you, as you are comfortable, to say them aloud in this space, and among these people.

But I don't want this experience to simply be an exercise in repetition. I want it to be a moment of possible transformation, a moment when Isaiah's prophetic words have the opportunity to call us to a new way of life, and a moment in which the commitments to action we already have can be deepened and broadened.

I will share Isaiah's statements with you one at a time, and after I say each verse I invite you to take a moment. Let their weight and meaning sit within your hearts and minds. Feel the implications to your lives of allowing the Christ to be born within you. And then,

after a couple of seconds, when you are ready, say them out loud, or even silently within yourself.

So let's begin.

Feel free to close your eyes.

I will sound the bell to begin the recitation, and I will sound it again at the close of our meditation.

[Sound Bell]

The spirit of God is upon me.

God has anointed me.

God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.

God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.

God has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives.

God has sent me to release the prisoners.

God has sent me to give those who mourn a garland instead of ashes.

God has clothed me with the garments of salvation.

[Sound Bell]

You may open your eyes.

In this recitation we have not only heard the words of the prophet, our hearts and minds have participated in their vision. And in doing

so we have tasted what it might mean for Christ to be born in our lives, here and now, among these people, and in this imperfect world.

This is the possibility of what we will find when we look into that manger in Bethlehem.

This is the angelic invitation that calls us from the heavens of our hearts.

This is a reflection of what it looks like for God's love to be born among her broken and hurting children.

And this is nothing less than what Christmas looks like.

AMEN.