



## **Anointed**

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring  
Eden United Church of Christ  
Hayward, California***

***Third Sunday in Advent  
December 11, 2011  
Isaiah 61: 1-4; 8-11***

What motivates you when you get discouraged? How do you pick yourself up and keep going when you experience a major setback in something that you care deeply about? Where can you go for the encouragement you need to stay focused on the vision of what is possible, rather than dwelling on obstacles and disappointments along the way?

## **II**

Our Annual FESCO Christmas Luncheon, which was held this past Friday, was in many ways our most successful luncheon ever. We had the biggest crowd, spirits were high, the food was excellent, and the speaker was inspiring. In baseball terms, it was a “grand slam!”

Unfortunately, in the midst of our celebration, as many of you have heard, our lunch ticket money was stolen, and this loss put a damper on things—at least for a while.

The envelope in which ticket proceeds were collected was recovered, along with possibly all of the checks written for the meal tickets, although the checks were torn in two. Not surprisingly, the cash was gone.

Since secrecy about these matters is not helpful, Kathy Miller, our church administrator, and I are in the midst of following up with attendees to make sure that everyone who attended the event knows about the theft and knows that the checks were recovered. As a further step toward recovery, we’re asking those who paid for their ticket by check to consider reissuing a check in the same amount as the check that was destroyed.

The good news, amidst this bad news on Friday, was that the volunteers who hosted the luncheon worked as energetically and as well in responding to the theft as they did in preparing for and serving the meal.

We held a debriefing session after the theft was discovered, and we developed a better strategy for securing ticket proceeds in the future. In addition, many kind and generous

people in our church and our wider circle of friends stepped up and made contributions to help cover the cash that was stolen.

When all is said and done, I wouldn't be surprised if more money is raised for FESCO by the end of this month than was raised this past Friday. Still, it will take more than a couple of weeks for most of us to recover from the grief of realizing that someone in our midst stole money from the church—and ultimately from FESCO, an organization that serves families who are homeless.

How do we, individually and collectively, absorb an event like this theft and maintain our will to keep working on projects like the luncheon, which point towards God's vision of a just society?

My recommendation is that we take a lesson from Isaiah and ascribe to his wisdom.

## II

The grief that many of us have felt in association with the theft on Friday is a small taste of the feelings that the Israelite exiles must have felt when they first returned home from Babylon, and heard Isaiah utter the prophecy recorded in chapter 61. In a word, they felt robbed.

The amount of spiritual, physical, and emotional energy required to make their nation homeland and lives whole again must have been staggering. The Temple had been destroyed. The herds of livestock that their families had owned were long gone. The vineyards and orchards that their ancestors had homesteaded had gone wild. The remnant who returned to Israel had been robbed of their youth, their property, their holy places, their culture, and, perhaps most devastating, they had been robbed of their dreams.

The remnant had been marched into Babylon when most were babies, or before they were born. Few, if any, knew the way home. When they arrived back in Israel some 40 years later, everything was a mess.

Imagine, then, the contrast between Isaiah's vision in the verses and the reality that the returned exiles were living in the early sixth century BCE.

The Spirit of the Sovereign God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me;  
to bring good tidings to the afflicted,  
God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and opening of the prison to those who are bound,  
to proclaim the year of God'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;  
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of God, that God may be glorified.

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.<sup>1</sup>

Isaiah envisioned Israel and its inhabitants healed and whole again. Those who had been robbed of everything that had mattered most to them were promised, not only the return of their material property, but more importantly, the healing of their hearts and the fulfillment of their dreams.

### III

The remnant who returned to Zion felt robbed. Their sense of anger, disappointment, and despair is hard for many of us to imagine,. Still, most, if not all, of us have had a taste of despair, and we can draw on those experiences in order to imagine the grief that our forebears must have felt.

What may be harder for us to imagine, though, is how anyone—especially the remnant—came to believe that Isaiah’s vision was true—that a different world was possible, and that they could be part of it.

*How is hope possible to dream dreams in such dire circumstances?*

According to Isaiah what makes a hopeful vision and the reality of a different world possible is that someone sees, someone proclaims, and someone gives birth to that hope. For the prophet Isaiah that healer is the Anointed One.

*Who is the anointed?*

In Ancient Israel, some say that Cyrus of Persia was the “Anointed One.” Cyrus was the political figure who liberated the exiles after he conquered the Babylonians and Assyrians..<sup>2</sup>

Others say that the Anointed One was a prophet greater than Isaiah, who had not yet arrived on the scene. Skeptics say that the unknown prophet never came, that he was Missing in Action (MIA).

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<sup>1</sup> 61:1–4

<sup>2</sup> Cradock et al, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year B* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press, Inc., 1993) p. 15.

Christians traditionally say that Jesus of Nazareth was the prophet, the Anointed One, whom Isaiah envisioned as healer and hope-restorer. I believe that is true. I believe that Jesus was and is the Anointed One.

A further possibility, and one that I subscribe to, is that the anointed is anyone who shares Isaiah's vision, like the remnant who rebuilt Israel, and anyone who strives to follow Jesus' example, and usher in the year of God's favor.

*What does the prophet mean by "the year of God's favor"?*

Some biblical scholars say that the year of God's favor is the sabbatical year, the occasion that comes every seven years when, according to Leviticus, slaves are to be freed and debts canceled.

Other scholars say that the year of God's favor is the Jubilee year, the fiftieth year, which is also described in Leviticus. It is the year when slaves are to be freed, debts canceled, and landholdings redistributed to their original owners.<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of whether Isaiah was referring to the sabbatical year or the Jubilee year, the vision of justice and healing was very clear to the remnant. It could not be missed.

The only questions then for modern audiences are these: "Do we believe in the vision, and more importantly, do we subscribe to this vision in word and deed?"

#### IV

Many people are eager to join in what amounts to humanitarian endeavors that point toward Isaiah's vision, but I submit to you that in order for a person and a people to experience the Sabbath or Jubilee envisioned by Isaiah and the priestly leaders who first proceeded him, we must go deeper. We must first open ourselves to the spiritual healing that undergirds and makes possible the physical manifestations of Sabbath and Jubilee. How do we do that?

Yesterday, Cate Steane, FESCO's Executive Director, sketched a Jubilee vision for us of a world in which no child is homeless. She thanked those gathered at the luncheon for their support of FESCO's mission to end homelessness. She challenged us to embrace the vision of a secure and loving home for every child in our community. This is an example of a humanitarian endeavor based on Isaiah's vision that FESCO has been committed to for nearly 25 years.

Many people of good will share this vision of a roof over head, food on the table, and a stable home life for all children. Not so many people understand that it takes more than tax dollars and charity work to fulfill this vision. It also takes the tender loving care of

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

people like you and me, and the healing work of the Holy Spirit, or whatever name people give to divine intervention in our world.

As most of us know from first-hand experience, either from our own experiences of childhood poverty, or our efforts to help overcome the grim realities of poverty for the children in our community, it doesn't take much for the wind to be blown out our proverbial sails—wind that would propel us forward toward God's vision of Sabbatical or Jubilee.

So how do we set our sights on that vision and stay on course, particularly in times when we feel robbed of justice?

## V

A possible first step in our spiritual healing would be to embrace the ancient liturgical practice of anointing. Anointing is an odd and wonderful practice found in many cultures and religions, which means similar things to all of us. Anointing is about healing. Sometimes healing is the result of confession and forgiveness, which Roman Catholics call "reconciliation," and sometimes it's about recovery from an injury or improved health.

Liturgically speaking, in the Judeo-Christian traditions, healing has been associated with unction (a combination of forgiveness and healing), the sacrament of baptism, and the rite of confirmation.

Unction is a rite that low-church, progressive Protestants have only begun to embrace in the past twenty years or so, as a result of liturgical renewal and ecumenical dialogue.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, ironically, has also been a source of inspiration and recommitment to this practice, as we rediscovered the importance of human touch and pastoral prayer for the sick, the dying, and the worried well.

About that same time, some twenty plus years ago, many churches in the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ, of which we are a part, began incorporating anointing in their Eucharistic practices. Eden Church is no exception. A few years later, around the time that a host of people from the South Hayward UCC congregation came to Eden, we incorporated the practice of anointing into our communion services, and we have continued that practice ever since.

Some who were members of Eden Church in those days have told me that initially participation in this ritual felt scary and awkward, and they weren't sure about how accepting the congregation would be of this "new" (old) practice, or whether it would be retained in our liturgy; but they decided to try it for a while and see how it felt.

Then and now, worshippers were and still are offered the opportunity to pass on the anointing when they come forward for the Sacrament of Communion, but very few do.

I sense this is because most worshippers have found that anointing matters. That even though it is a very intimate and counterculture activity, anointing is moreover a healing experience. Through this ancient and wondrous act, we begin our own healing and affirm our commitment to the healing vision that Isaiah proclaimed and that Jesus embodied. Through the oil of anointing, we remember our baptismal calling:

...to bring good tidings to the afflicted,  
God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and opening of the prison to those who are bound,  
to proclaim the year of God'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;  
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of God, that God may be glorified.

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.<sup>4</sup>

Through the oil of anointing, our own healing begins, so that our hope is restored, and we can be the faith healers that Isaiah envisioned, and that Christ called us to be. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> 61:1-4