

A PROPHET'S CALLING

SERMON FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

DECEMBER 14, 2014

ISAIAH 61:1-4, 6-11

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, MARIANNA, FLORIDA

JOHN 1:6-8

TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

It is a prophet's calling to speak God's word. Sometimes a prophet is called to speak God's words of judgment. Sometimes a prophet is called to speak God's words of hope. Sometimes a prophet is called to speak God's words of comfort. Sometimes a prophet speaks to the king. Other times a prophet speaks to the powerful. Yet others, a prophet speaks to the weak. Sometimes a prophet speaks to sinners. Sometimes a prophet speaks to the righteous. But always, a prophet is called to speak the word of God.

The words of the prophet here in Isaiah 61 are words spoken by the prophet as he describes what God has called him to do. The Spirit of God is upon him, and God has anointed him, and sent him forth as a messenger of good news.

When Jesus began His ministry, when He opened the scroll in the synagogue to read the word of God, these are the words which He read.

In a very real sense, those of us who are called to be the church are called to be prophets. If we are truly called to be the body of Christ in the world, then we must be called to speak the words that Christ would speak, to do the things that Christ would do, to be the person of Christ in the world.

So if these words of a prophet's calling were important to Jesus, if, as some suggest, this calling is His calling, then these words are important to us, and they just may be our calling.

First, the spirit of God was upon the prophet as he spoke those words. Without the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit upon us, we are nothing, we can do nothing. John Calvin wrote in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* that all our natural works are sinful. What he actually wrote was that all works of natural man are sin. We can do nothing that is not sinful without divine inspiration, without God's help, made known to us through the Holy Spirit.

Without God's inspiration, we let our greed, our lust, our pride, soil and spoil our good works. Our ulterior motives, our hidden agendas, over-power any natural goodness. Indeed, we are sinners. Paul wrote that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But Paul also wrote that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for our sins, and that while the wages of sin is indeed death, the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

John Calvin says that because of that gift, we are to lead lives of grateful obedience, or obedient gratitude, depending upon your translation.

And in our obedient, grateful state, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us and we are called to God's purposes.

The next part of the prophet's calling was to bring good news to the poor. Now some folks would say, "The Good News is the Gospel, and we are called to preach, to proclaim, to witness to, that Good News." And they'd be right. But it doesn't stop there. Go home and read the last part of Matthew 25, or find a copy of my sermon from two weeks ago, and you will see. Bringing good news to the poor involves doing something for the poor.

Now I'm going to brag a little bit. This church, First Presbyterian Church of Marianna, Florida, brings good news to the poor every Wednesday morning. The good news is that there is food for the hungry, but more than that, there are smiles on the faces of the people who are giving out the food, there are warm greetings, and no conditions, just don't come more than once a month. And no matter how long the line is, and recently it topped 200, we always have food for the hungry.

If you are poor, that is good news.

Now I want to brag on our denomination a little: we Presbyterians do a lot to stop hunger. We do more than anyone else to bring fresh water to the thirsty. And we do more than anyone else to provide shelter for the poor and the elderly. John Milton serves as President, Chairman of the Board, head elected honcho, for our Westminster Retirement Communities. Now we Presbyterians have splendid retirement facilities like Westminster Oaks in Tallahassee, and like the Towers down on the water in Bradenton, and these are luxurious and grand. But in places like Lehigh Acres and Punta Gorda and Port Charlotte, we have low income housing for the elderly, housing that is affordable, that is beautiful. The church I served in West Virginia sponsored two housing programs in that little town of Montgomery. One was the tallest building in town, the seventy two unit seven story Rivermont Presbyterian Homes, for Senior Citizens. The other was the 48 unit low income family housing, called simply Rivermont Homes.

When I was looking at retirement, I actually interviewed for chaplaincy positions at Presbyterian Homes in Lakeland, and at a beautiful retirement community owned and operated by Pine Shores Presbyterian Church in Sarasota.

Obviously, that isn't where God wanted me to be, or I wouldn't be standing in this pulpit.

Then for a while, Polly and I actually had our names on the list for a Presbyterian Retirement Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, run by Presbyterian Medical Services, and yes, I know, they are referred to all over the Southwest as PMS. PMS is also the largest healthcare provider in New Mexico.

Come to think about it, Huw and Rachel Christopher are living in a Presbyterian Retirement Community in California.

All across America, we Presbyterians bring good news to the poor. And it isn't just us Presbyterians. It is everyone who is engaged in meeting the needs of the poor and homeless in the name of Jesus Christ who is answering a prophet's calling.

But that is just the start of a prophet's calling: we must also bring good news to the oppressed, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, as well as the day of God's vengeance. And when we finish with that, we are to comfort all who mourn.

If I were going to preach until one or two o'clock, I could tell you how the Presbyterian Church historically and presently has lived out a prophet's calling. And how other denominations and congregations do as well.

In the season of Advent, we heed the prophet's calling, calling us to repentance, calling us to service, calling us to faith in the one who is surely coming again, Jesus Christ our Lord.

