

Sunday December 13 2020 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church

**Bible Study – Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28
“Deck the Halls”**

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have each participant answer the question, “How will your Christmas decorations differ this year from previous years?”

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.

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.

Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

What touches your heart, what do you hear in the scripture, what questions do you have, or what doesn't make sense to you in the story?

Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

Read Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28 again

Some reflection questions – Write down your thoughts or share your thoughts with the person or group you are with.

- The book of Isaiah is not short, and it covers a vast period of time. We can, however, note three broad movements: the first is a time of warning and impending judgment; the second is encouragement to the broken and desperate; and the third is a word of hope. The third movement is where this passage occurs. To those in exile, Isaiah's direction is to decorate – "garland instead of ashes . . . the mantle of praise instead of a faith spirit . . . build ancient ruins." In a period of darkness, Isaiah points to the light. The season of Advent also occurs during a period of literal darkness, as our daylight hours are getting shorter. More than mere positive thinking, we are trusting the faithfulness of God, which is the basis of our hope. How are you experiencing hope this Advent season?
- How does John the Baptist provide a model for discipleship? [He points to Jesus with his whole life (even with what he wears and what he eats!).]
- What does it look like to choose to live by hope and not despair?
- As we decorate, we wait. How is Advent a time of active waiting? [Through spiritual practices such as corporate worship, prayer, Scripture reading, and other activities, we are reminded of God's faithfulness, and we receive confidence for our hope when all seems dark and chaotic.]
- What are other ways we can actively wait and be a witness to the one who will come and restore righteousness? [We do so through being hopeful, by helping others experience the hope of God, and by inviting others to experience God's love.]

Closing Reflection Question

How is this scripture calling you to change, to see, to be or what might it be calling you to do?

Prayer (10 minutes). Each person prays sharing their answer the following statements:

I ask God for....

I thank God for.....

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, pray the closing prayer. Ask for a volunteer to lead the group or read the following prayer in unison:

Anointing God, empower us through your Holy Spirit to see beyond ourselves so that we might catch a glimpse of your glory. Give us new eyes to see the darkness others are experiencing and help us to be pointers to the light of your faithfulness, love, and grace. **Amen.**

And now we pray The Lord's Prayer....

Our Father who art in Heaven
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power
and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.