

Sunday, December 31, 2023 – Easter Hill United Methodist Church

Bible Study

First Sunday after Christmas Day

“Watchnight: Our Spirit Waits”

Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 2:22-40

Open with a word of prayer

Gathering Time (5-10 minutes). In pairs or groups of three, have participants consider their Christmas celebration. Christmas day is past, and in much of the community, Christmas (which began with retailers weeks ago) is over. Today is actually the seventh day of Christmastide. Are you still celebrating the birth of Christ, or are you ready to be done? If over-indulging in goodies and more-than-usual social activity has been the norm of late, how might you celebrate the Christ child in a quieter, more contemplative way?

Isaiah 61:10-62:3. 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 BCE (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 BCE), including an "epilogue" of sorts in chapters 54-66 that describe the struggles of the suffering servant's followers as they return to Jerusalem and begin to rebuild. This week's reading is at the center of this last section and overlaps with the reading for the third Sunday in Advent (December 17), amplifying the prophet's calling: his proclamation of the good news to those who suffer on God's behalf will not be a one-time event, but rather an ongoing ministry until the goal is achieved and Zion's glory is seen and acknowledged by all peoples and nations.

Galatians 4:4-7. Context. Galatia was a Roman province in the central region of Asia Minor (what is now Turkey). Paul had first preached in the region in the late 40s, and the letter which we now have was written sometime between 50 and 56. The occasion for the letter was the arrival of "missionaries" in Galatia who questioned Paul's teaching and his authority. They insisted that to become fully Christian, Gentiles (non-Jews; the Galatians were all Gentiles) were required to be circumcised and to observe Jewish law. This was diametrically opposed to Paul's teaching: for him, the necessity of Jewish practices was no different than the "slavery" to the elemental spirits of the world of paganism that they had experienced before their conversion. Paul insists that their new life in the Spirit of Christ frees them from all of the other religious ideologies/spiritual forces that were competing for their allegiance. In this week's reading, he stresses that we all, both Jew and Gentile, have become God's children through the work of Jesus who was "born of a woman, born under the law" – the closest Paul comes to the Christmas theme.

Luke 2:22-40. Context. Luke's account of Jesus' birth concludes with this week's reading. According to Jewish custom, a woman was ritually unclean and underwent purification for a period of 40 days following the birth of a boy. After this time, she made sacrifice at the Temple. Mary's sacrifice is modest, indicating the family's poor status. Luke's story emphasizes the piety of Jesus' parents and the pious reactions of Simeon and Anna who recognized in Jesus the fulfillment of God's promises of redemption and salvation.

Read Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 2:22-40

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 text?

Read Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 2:22-40 again -

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

- The wedding finery mentioned in Isaiah 61:10 (garland and jewels) is a metaphor for the finest gifts of God (salvation and righteousness). The wedding as a joyous occasion is a metaphor for the much longed-for restoration of the community of exiles. What metaphors can you use to portray how you feel about the gifts of God to you?
- Consider the notion of vindication. All the passages speak in some way to the restoration and/or vindication of Israel. What is the sense of vindication in reference to Israel as a people of God and the way we may think of vindication today?
- Galatians 4:4-7 reminds us that we are no longer slaves, but children; as children, then heirs—because in the fullness of time, God's promise came to fruition. Do you see yourself as a child and an heir? What does that mean to you in the context of day-to-day life? Have you had an experience of vindication or restoration “in the fullness of time”? What is it like to be patient; waiting (and hopefully, working) until the fullness of time?
- Simeon (Luke 2:25-32) was apparently not an invited participant in Jesus' presentation, but the Spirit guided him to the Temple, where he announced the holy purpose of Jesus. Have you ever felt that you were part of a holy moment? What was that like? Have you ever had an “aha moment” of insight when some purpose or direction from God (or a trusted person of faith) became clear? Have you experienced the “light for revelation” in any other way?
- Simeon also described this baby's life as one filled with opposition and pain (Luke 2:33-35). What must it have been like for new parents to feel the weight of responsibility for what was to come from Jesus' life? Has God called you to a special task? How did it feel to embark upon it? What sort of support did you need and what did you get? How does your faith enable or empower you to act in spite of risk, opposition, or pain?

- Anna, a prophet and righteous widow, (Luke 2:36-38) reiterated, even legitimized, Simeon’s claim of Jesus as redeemer. What “elders” in your church help support ministry, encourage participation, or otherwise advance the goals of the church? How can you cultivate an openness both to the voice of experience as well as to the voice of the “holy children” in your congregation?
- What are the gifts of the Christmas season that you will take with you into the season of “business as usual”?

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). Share prayer requests and respond appropriately.

Sending Forth (2 minutes). After all, have shared, end by praying the following or a similar prayer:

Holy, Saving God, we confess that we have focused during Advent on many things besides the “reason for the season.” We have overextended, overindulged, and underappreciated. Yet, we are the continual recipients of your gifts and grace, for which we are humbly grateful. Return our focus to the gifts of salvation and restoration and enliven us to be full partners in redemption. In the name of Christ, the light of revelation to the world. **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.