

## "Restoration to Holiness"

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Today is the third Sunday of advent. Can you believe it? It seems that we are hauling the mail through advent, but that is what happens we have Christmas coming up on a Sunday. It seems to move things up in the season before we realize it. Yet we must keep the focus on Jesus Christ in this time, so that we are prepared in our hearts for his coming on this earth.

Today is traditionally gaudete Sunday in advent, which means a rejoice or be glad. We are to be glad that we are in this season, to rejoice in the coming of the Christ. Rather than getting bogged down and worrying about what culture defines as necessary for Christmas, we can rejoice in the true meaning of the season, the Christ centered Joy that comes about through a time of preparing.

Yet in all of this preparation we have been discussing, today and in the previous Sundays, there is some joy that we can experience now. In our reading today from Isaiah we have a passage that discusses restoration for Israel. In our lives we often face times when we believe we have messed up beyond hope, we feel that there is no hope for restoring what was before. Our spiritual ancestors in Israel experienced the same feelings in their lives, yet in the end there was hope for them.

I believe that the greatest stories of the Christian tradition are those of restoration, of those where people have a new start, a new beginning, a new day to live their lives. Even those of us who may not have an apparent need for restoration can experience it in our lives. Jesus Christ came to walk on this earth so that we might experience restoration in our lives, so that we would have life eternal.

The story in Isaiah is one of the hallmarks of restoration in the Christian story. The Israelites had been exiled to a far away land, yet it was time for them to return to their homes. There was some fear of returning home, for the people did not know what kind of home they were returning to. God had told them that he would restore them to the way that they were, but we know that would have been a scary process, if you didn't know the exact finite details of what was about to happen. All you knew was that you were going to be restored, and that was it.

I believe we face a similar situation in our experience as Christians. I'd like for us to think some on what it might feel like to be a person was going to be restored. We have many people in our society in who are in need of restoration and we can imagine their experience if we allow ourselves to stretch beyond our experience. For example, people that might be in need of restoration include prisoners, people who have experienced infidelity in their marriage, the victims of crimes, or people who have wronged someone they care about. We can think of times when we were in need of restoration and we weren't sure of where to go. We can be like the Israelites in our need for restoration.

I think one the biggest examples of the need of restoration are prisoners who are in need of a second chance. We hear horrible stories of how prisoners who have committed crimes getting released, and then committing more crimes and landing back in jail. They are often at the wrong end of a system that does a great job of punishing people, but not rehabilitating people. Yet what about those prisoners who are truly sorry for what they have done? What about those prisoners who want to get back into society and be good citizens? I think they face challenges that are far beyond anything they could imagine before they are released.

There is a show on TV that I have started to watch, and it is Pit bulls and Parolees on Animal Planet. It's about a Pit bull rescue center in California, which gives a very misunderstood

breed a second chance, where they can find good homes and be restored themselves. This center is also very intentional about hiring parolees, people who face a hard time finding work elsewhere because they carry the label felon or convict. They face challenges in reintegrating into society and face challenges in restoring their lives, and this show offers a glimpse into that process.

I think the biggest challenge I see facing both the dogs and the parolees when they enter into the world is the perception that people have of them. Folks have a hard time giving people a second chance and sometimes even giving a dog a second chance. We have a hard time giving a second chance because we might be afraid of getting hurt or being fearful of other things.

Think about yourself when you were in need of a second chance. Were you scared? Were you afraid that you might mess up again? These are the same questions that these parolees face as well. They have to overcome their fears so that they might overcome the hardship of the world that they face.

Likewise, the Israelites had to overcome their fear of getting a second chance. The Israelites were in the position they were in because they had ignored God and God allowed them to be sent from their homes because they had forgotten about God. They had really messed up and they had been facing the consequences for their actions. But it was time for them to be restored, to be given a second chance.

The Israelites probably had some of the same fears of the parolees. What would the perceptions of other people be of them? Would they mess up again? What if they couldn't make with their second chance? But they overcame this, because God was on their side and willing to help them overcome their difficulties of a second chance.

We know that God offered a second chance to the Israelites, much like he gives us a second chance. We all can experience a second chance in our lives in God, and even a third, fourth, and so on. We have a God on our side that offers us restoration to a state of being that is life giving, not condemning. God forgives, so that we can improve ourselves and live a life that glorifies God and all the blessings that we receive in our lives.

God gave the world a second chance at life through the saving work of Jesus Christ. We have all been given a second chance and the opportunity for restoration. We have all fallen short of the expectations of our lives. We have fallen short of God's expectations because of sin. We are all sinners in need of a second chance. No matter where you come from in life you have been given a second chance in Jesus Christ. All you have to do is confess that you have fallen to sin, and in need of a being redeemed in Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ came into the world not to condemn us for what we have done, but to offer us a new life. We don't have to live in the past of regret and wish we hadn't done things that were wrong. Instead, we can move forward and learn from our mistakes, just like the parolees on the show I was talking about can do with the opportunity given them. We don't have to be scared of what might come in the future with our second chance, we have the assurance that we have been given a second chance by recognizing what we have done, forgiving ourselves, and moving forward.

In this season of preparation, we must prepare ourselves for the opportunity to grow, learn, and move forward in our lives. The season of Advent and Christmas is a great opportunity to begin again, and move forward. No matter what you have done in your life, no matter how big or small, now is the time to move forward, commit yourselves to a second chance in Jesus Christ and be ready for the restoration that comes from a new life in Jesus Christ.

I encourage us to take a look at ourselves and look for the ways we can be restored ourselves. But there is a second step to this process and that is giving people who are seeking a second chance and restoration in their lives the opportunity to succeed. This means that we have to be willing to forgive other people for the wrongs and shortcomings in their lives and be willing to support them in their opportunity to grow and become better people in Jesus Christ. We have been given the second chance in Jesus Christ and it is our responsibility and blessing to give other people a chance in their lives.

God gave the Israelites another chance to grow and be the people that they were originally called to be. God gave us today a second chance in Jesus Christ to become the people that we were meant to be in this life. We must ask for forgiveness for our sins and allow the transforming power of Jesus Christ to change us and restore us to who we were meant to be. We must prepare for the second chance and restoration and take the time now for us to live in Jesus Christ. Amen.