

First Presbyterian Church
Greenfield, Indiana
Pastor John J. Paulson
December 14, 2008 Third Sunday In Advent
Faith and Prayer!

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19	God is listening!
Isaiah 61:1 – 4, 8 – 11	Delight in the Lord!
John 1: 6 – 8, 19 – 28	Jesus is coming!
1 Thessalonians 5: 16 – 24	God is faithful!

***Informally Before the Sermon This is the third Sunday of Advent.
Christmas is getting closer day-by-day. Our wait for the celebration of the
arrival of the Christ child is almost over; we only have eleven more days to go.
How should we be spending these days? What does God ask us to do?***

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be pleasing to you, Oh Lord, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

What does the Lord ask us to do as we await the arrival of Jesus once again? What should we be doing during this special season of Advent this year? If you read the newspapers or watch television, you find that you should be shopping.

First, it seems that we should be spending and spending some more to keep the economy strong. Buying a new cel phone, maybe a one hundred seventy nine dollar touch-screen Blackberry would not only bring happiness, but help the country out as well. And, all you have to do is to sign a new two year contract and give them your credit card; then, according to the way I hear the ads, you will be happy.

Of course, it really would help if you would buy a new car from one of the “big three” before the end of the year. I have noticed that the ads for the new cars aren’t even talking about the status they give you or the wonderful way you will feel as you avoid the trucks on I-70 on your trip to Indy. Not this season. Now they try to make it feel that you are almost anti-American if you don’t buy one from Ford or GM or Chrysler right now.

Get to Toys R Us early, before the best WII games are gone. If not, your kids’ or grandkids’ Christmas might be ruined. “Cooking Mama”? Do you want X-Box 360 or WII or DS?

Did you know you can save up to seventy percent at Burlington Coat Factory on your Christmas gifts; according to them, those wonderful low prices mean that you actually have some money left for yourself.

And on and on it goes.

Can't find what someone has on their list? Don't worry, for only a two dollar and fifty cent charge, you can get a gift card that they can use at any Simon mall. Or, you can go to Walgreen's or Marsh or CVS and buy a gift card for just about any restaurant or store in Indiana. What can be easier. Buy, buy, buy. Spend, spend, spend.

And on and one it goes. Buy, buy, buy! Spend, spend, spend! It seems as if it is your duty as an American! According to our culture, that's what this four week period before Christmas, the period of Advent is all about. Filling shopping bags; putting packages under the tree.

But, that's not very Biblical. Of course, you could make an argument that the gifts of the Magi were in fact Christmas presents for Baby Jesus and his family. That they set the pattern for our gift-giving today and therefore all the buying and shopping is really a Christian responsibility. Maybe, but not to the excess our society expects today.

Giving and sharing are part of our Christian life. Giving and sharing are Biblical; we give to others and we share what God has given to us. But, not exactly in the same way that the ads in *The Reporter* or *The Star* seem to tell us.

Where do we find out what we should be doing if not from our modern culture?

One of our guidelines comes from the prophet Micah who wrote about twenty seven hundred years ago! During Advent, more than any other season in our Christian year, we look to the writings of the Old Testament prophets. The prophets were bringing God's word to the Hebrew people during times of stress and difficulty. Times when they were going astray and disobeying God's commands. They were prophetic in the sense that they told the people what would happen if they didn't shape up and obey; they brought God's promises and God's requirements in terms that the people understood whether they were facing trouble from Assyria or Babylon; whether their king was a good leader or a self-serving rascal.

Prophets were not only proclaimer's of gloom and doom; they also brought good news. Isaiah, one of Micah's contemporaries, more than any other prophet, speaks about God's promises to the people; promises that predict and promise a better future for God's chosen people.

After much preaching about the negative way God is looking at the Hebrew nation, last week we heard God tell Isaiah it is time to preach a message of comfort to the people. To let them know that in the future their troubles will be over and their lives will be better; actually, according to Isaiah, they will be better than they ever have been before. There is a wonderful future ahead! Someday!

In today's reading, however, Isaiah takes a detour in his message to talk about mission. We listen to him as he describes his mission, or, possibly, the mission of someone else. We hear Isaiah speaking of God's call in words that have stood the test of time for all Christians, outlining some ways that we put Micah's requirements to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God into action.

Jesus is a student of the Old Testament. Of course, when Jesus begins his ministry, there is only one writing of the Word of God, and it is what we have come to call the Old Testament. It is the history of the Hebrew people as told through many different writers. Jesus knows it well, and quotes it many times as he ministers for three years throughout Jerusalem and the surrounding territories.

The New Testament tells us the story of Jesus and begins with four gospel stories about Jesus' ministry and his impact on the world then and now. The story of Jesus is related to us by four individuals who saw Jesus in different ways. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John each portray a different, yet similar, picture of God's Son in our world.

Luke uses our passage from Isaiah to set the stage for Jesus' ministry. He tells us that Jesus was the liturgist in the Temple one day, and was to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus picks up the scroll, and turns to the same passage that Richard shared with us this morning and begins reading:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹

This really was the beginning of the end of Jesus' ministry. The religious authorities of his day were in charge. No way were they going to let this upstart thirty year old step in and question their relationship with God. He has a mission from God, but, how can he carry it out when those he was sent to won't ever listen?

Of course, he can't. And, it leads to his execution on the cross.

Back to Isaiah. What was he writing about? Did Isaiah write this knowing that it would serve as the outline of the ministry of God's Son at some time in the future? Or, did Isaiah pen these words to outline the ministry of anyone who desires to do God's work in our world? Possibly both.

Of course Jesus didn't read the entire passage that we heard. Isaiah added a couple of other missions:

to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion--
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendor

There are some key action verbs in this passage that not only applied to Isaiah himself, and to Jesus, but seem to apply to all Christians as well. This mission is not one of sitting by the fireside and reading the scriptures; this is a active mission that Isaiah is describing. Listen to these action words:

PREACH – BIND UP (OR BRING RELIEF) –
PROCLAIM – COMFORT – PROVIDE – BESTOW

How do these fit in with Micah's charge to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God? How do these fit into our lives as members of First Presbyterian Church?

¹ Luke 4: 18 – 19 (NIV)

We act justly when we treat others the same way we would want to be treated by them. When we help those who are in need, regardless of who they are or what they can do for us in return. We love mercy when we give others a second and a third chance; when we forgive someone for what they may have done to us. We walk humbly with our God when we serve others in God's name, not for credit or publicity or public recognition, but because there are others who need to be served. The gospel writers describe for us time after time where Jesus reaches out to those he does not know and helps them in one way or another. Most of the time he actually tells those he has helped not to tell anyone how they were healed or who helped them out. That's humility.

Again, what does that have to do with us?

Last weekend many people gathered at Westminster Neighborhood Center on the near east side of Indianapolis to provide clothing and food and Christmas spirit to over one hundred fifty families. When families arrived on Saturday morning, they were welcomed and followed a trail through the old church building where they found all sorts of good things. One room was filled with socks, hats, scarves and underwear for them to choose from. A lot of that underwear, and most of those scarves were right here in the Selman room last week. Let's see: Bring relief, comfort, provide. Seems to me that that part of our mission was being carried out. Two families that we call Family A and Family B will have a better Christmas because we chose to share with them. Coats, shoes, toys shirts, pants, tools, watches all appeared in the Selman Room to be wrapped by our youth group last Wednesday night.

Of course we are not helping out family A and family B. We are bringing good news, proclaiming that we care, bestowing hope on Richard and his two sons Richard Jr. and Eric. We are bringing the message that someone really cares to Wendy and Aericka as well. We are proclaiming God's love; not through preaching, but through living out Isaiah's mission for us.

Many people in our community can not live independently, can not work to support themselves, and need a boost once in a while. That box we filled with all sorts of personal care stuff brings a message of comfort to many who are brokenhearted; a message of love that tells them they are not isolated and forgotten in a group home or a nursing facility.

And it goes on and on. Showing people that God's love is much more than just telling them about the stories in the Bible. Giving of our time and our treasures; using the spiritual gifts that we have received to the glory of God. We all have heard the old adage, "Actions Speak Louder Than Words"; well, our actions show people God's love as God works through us as we continue Jesus' ministry in our world today.

That's what we are all about. We come to worship to praise and thank God for all God does for us. We come to confess and ask forgiveness. We come to fellowship and get to know each other better and to share our concerns for each other and for others that we know. That's about an hour to an hour and a half out of our one hundred and sixty eight hour week. The other one hundred sixty six or so are where we serve God and carry out our mission. Those are the hours we have available to PREACH – BRING RELIEF – PROCLAIM – COMFORT – PROVIDE – BESTOW on others.

We have been blessed by a wonderful, loving God. A God who expects little in return other than our faith and our prayers. Faith and prayers that lead us in thanksgiving to serve others in God's name. AMEN