

The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me: A Meditation on Isaiah 61

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Over the last twenty-three years of pastoral ministry, I have become convinced that our greatest fear is that we are stuck with ourselves. We would all love to be a little different, and the marketing departments of most corporations are counting on that because that's how they peddle products—promising to improve you.

Here is a sampling from the current New York Times bestseller list for advice books:

- *The Automatic Millionaire: A One Step Plan to Live and Finish Rich*
- *Rich Dad; Poor Dad: Teaching One's Children How to Get Rich and Stay Rich*
- *The South Beach Diet*
- Three different Atkins diet books
- *The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands.*

Apparently money, dieting, and relationships are among our favorite ways for improving life. But no matter how much money you get, or how many pounds you lose, it is still you who shows up in the mirror in the morning. Frankly, that is the person each of us is most worried about.

We have been worried about ourselves from the beginning, and that is what has caused most of the problems with both the self and the world. According to Genesis, when we were created, we were placed in a garden that was filled with good fruit of which we could freely partake. We could have so many blessings, except the fruit of one tree that just happened to be in the middle of the garden. This is God's idea of a good creation—we were never meant to have it all. This drove Adam and Eve nuts; this drives you and me nuts. We are not whole! Something is missing. So where do we pitch our tent? Beneath the one thing we do not have. "Let the rest of the garden go to weed. How can I live without what is missing?"

So, we reach for what is beyond our created limitations. It is then that we are exiled from the garden, and it is then that we realize even though something was missing, it really was paradise. But now, paradise is lost. The hardest thing about this exile, though, is not that we lost so many blessings, but we lost the place where we knew communion with the Creator. As the early church fathers remind us, when we fell from communion from God, we brought the whole world down with us. As a result, all of creation is exiled from paradise.

This image of exile from God is a persistent theme that is woven into biblical narrative. Isaiah wrote his prophecy to a people who were facing exile from the holy land because God got fed up with how self-absorbed they had become. This exile was devastating to the Hebrews, not only because they had to watch the Babylonian armies destroy everything they had built for themselves but also because they were removed from the place where they could find God. Now the people were in captivity—exiled in a foreign land.

While so much of his prophecy is relentless in explaining the justice of God in leveling this judgment, Isaiah also offers consoling words that promise a coming restoration from exile. But his promise isn't just that one day they will be able to return to Jerusalem. His promise is that one day a servant of the Lord will restore all of creation to the glory of paradise. You'll know when that servant arrives, Isaiah claims, because the Spirit of the Lord will be upon him. This is the same Spirit who once hovered over creation, pushing aside the darkness and chaos, creating light and beauty in its place. When that Spirit is poured out upon the Lord's servant, all will be not improved but restored to communion with the Creator.

Like all preachers, Isaiah has a few homiletical devices that he loves to use over and over. Throughout this prophecy, he keeps weaving in phrases about the Spirit of the Lord between the long descriptions of judgment. In chapter 11, we are told that a shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse and the Spirit of the Lord shall be upon him. When that happens, the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, as they were created to do in paradise. In chapter 32, Isaiah promises that when the Spirit from on high is poured out on us the desert wilderness will again become a fruitful field. In chapter 42, "I will put my Spirit upon this servant and he will bring forth justice to the nations." But it is in chapter 61 that we receive a vision of the day this Servant of the Lord shall say, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of God" (v.1 NRSV). It is striking that Isaiah includes this note of vengeance and judgment at the end of so much hope. He cannot help but remind us of this grim consequence to self-absorption.

For centuries and centuries, the people waited for this servant of the Lord, this Messiah, who would bring about the restoration of creation. Then one day, in an unimportant village in Galilee, a rabbi named Jesus was asked to read the Scripture on the Sabbath day. He chose these words from Isaiah 61. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . ," and on Jesus continues through the well-rehearsed lines of the prophecy. But instead of concluding with the phrase about the day of vengeance of God, he omitted that, and instead said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21).

Do you see? Jesus Christ removes the judgment of exile from us. That is what Jesus' mission was all about. As the incarnation of God, Christ restores us to

communion with our Creator. Exiles are brought home to God. Humanity is restored to those who had become less than human. All creation can know recreation because the Spirit of the Lord has anointed this.

When Jesus was conceived, it was by the Holy Spirit—the same spirit who worked at creation. When Jesus was baptized in identification with us, the Spirit descended on him as a dove. Then the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness where he was tempted as we are. The Spirit led him day after day to a ministry of healing and the forgiveness of sin. All of it was a way of pressing the incarnation deeper and deeper, *binding Christ to us*.

When we get to the epistles of the New Testament, we find the authors constantly referring to the role of the Spirit who *binds us into Christ*. In the words of Paul, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom. 8:14). “In him [Christ], we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7). In the words of Peter, “set all your hope on the grace of Jesus Christ. . . for as it is written ‘you shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:13, 16). That’s not an imperative. It’s a promise. As you live in Christ, you *shall* be holy because Christ is holy.

You don’t become holy by trying to follow Jesus’ teachings. That’s just one more self-improvement program that won’t work any better than the others. You are made holy by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit who adopts you into the Son’s beloved relationship with the Father. The world isn’t made holy by our improvements upon it. Rather, it is made holy by the Son, anointed of the Spirit, to bring the world home to the Father.

What this means is that between the Father, the Son, and Spirit all the necessary roles for our salvation, for the salvation of the world, have been taken. Thus, we are not necessary. We are cherished as the prodigals who have been restored, but we are not needed. The Triune God does not need your help in raising children or for caring for the poor and oppressed. There is only one Servant who has the job of being the Messiah, and he doesn’t need help making improvements. If you start to think of yourself as necessary, then you are making yourself the messiah.

So, there’s nothing left for us to do? Oh no. What is left is being the Spirit-filled witness. But again, witnesses are not necessary. We have distorted the original meaning of this word to make it seem like we are the ones who do the converting of the world. Ask any courtroom judge, and he or she will tell you that the last thing we want is for the witness to get creative. Witnesses, just witness and then speak about what they saw. When the Spirit fills the life of a disciple, that person is turned into an apostle who goes into the entire world witnessing the salvation of Christ who holds all things together. Thus, the mission of the Christian is to see this Messiah who makes all things holy by his presence and to declare his salvation.

There isn’t any longer just one place that is holy land. Now no land is foreign to God, for in Christ all places are being restored to God. This includes you

days that are jam packed with car pools and dirty laundry, copy machines that jam when you need them most, phones that keep ringing and computers that keep crashing, and office meetings that go on forever and accomplish nothing. None of it is outside the realm of holiness. Neither are the impoverished neighborhoods around us. Neither are the Third World villages that struggle against starvation and disease. Neither are the homes of the affluent and the middle class.

Christ has brought all of creation back to God. He can be found in every corner of the earth—wherever the Spirit of the Lord is healing, forgiving, and bringing the exile home. So we, too, will go home, go to work, and go to the poor, not just to make improvements but to participate in a community made holy by the gracious work of the Triune God.

“Holy, Holy, Holy. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Amen.