

The Restoring Face of God

December 14, 2008

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

Over the past few weeks we've heard the testimonies of those who have completed the Exploring our Faith class. They've shared with us their stories of coming to know Jesus as Savior and Lord and why they now want to be members of this church. In many ways the stories reflect this prophecy in Isaiah 61. They have heard and understood the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They have experienced for themselves what it means to have the freedom and comfort of knowing that God forgives their sins and cleanses them and creates a new heart in them. We celebrate these stories and we celebrate the new life we all have in Jesus Christ.

This prophecy in Isaiah 61 is a prophecy that is continuing to be fulfilled in our time as God continues to draw people to himself, release them from the things that bind them, gives them joy instead of mourning, praise instead of despair, renewing and restoring lives, and establishing His kingdom in this world. The title of the sermon today is "The Restoring Face of God" because God is one who brings restoration. He fixes things that are broken and run down. In verse 8 where it is written "For I, the Lord, love justice" that word justice refers to making things right, the way they were intended to be by the Creator.

One TV show that I like to watch is "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition." You've probably seen it where they build a new home in a week for a family that has some type of need. A few years ago they built a home for a family up off of Red Lion Road and Bethannie and I went up there to watch them for a few hours. It was really impressive to see how they had everything organized and how in just a couple of days they had already demolished the old house and had the new one framed and all. But in this show, they don't restore the original house. They tear it down and build a new one. God restores. He takes what is there and He makes it like new. He restores it to its original purpose and design. He makes it right again. This is one of the meanings of the biblical concept of justice – making things right.

When Isaiah speaks of rebuilding ancient ruins, restoring places long devastated, renewing the ruined cities in verse 4 he's speaking of such a process of putting things right again – taking what has been ruined by sin and restoring it to its original purpose and design as the Creator planned it to be. This is what Jesus' life and ministry was about. According to Luke 4:21 Jesus announced in the synagogue of Nazareth that the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1 was fulfilled that day in their hearing; that he is the anointed one who proclaims good news and freedom and the year of the Lord's favor. Yet he was not recognized as the anointed one. In John 1 starting in verse 19, the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to question John the Baptist about who John was. They wanted to know if John was the anointed one and what his baptism was all about. John plainly stated that he was not the anointed one of Isaiah 61 but rather he was the figure from the prophecy of Isaiah 40, the voice of one calling in the wilderness, make straight the way for the Lord. Then he said in John 1:26, 27 "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." He was speaking of Jesus, the one they did not know. John was saying that Jesus was among them, one of their number so to speak, yet he was someone they didn't know about. They didn't have information about him. Jesus was an unknown to the religious leaders.

These words of John the Baptist are prophetic in that many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day never did understand who he was. He lived among them, ministered and taught among them, yet they failed to recognize that he is the messiah, the anointed one. Going back to Luke 4, after Jesus read the prophecy from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue of Nazareth, he said "Surely you will quote this proverb to me, 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me 'do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.' Truly I tell you, prophets are not accepted in their hometown." (verses 23-24) After Jesus finished speaking the people of his home synagogue were so furious they drove him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff in order to kill him.

Where Jesus is not recognized for who he truly is, there can be no work of restoration or true justice. This is why we still see so much devastation and ruin in the world around us. Jesus is not yet fully recognized by the world for who he truly is. But where he is recognized and accepted the places long devastated can be restored.

My grandmother is someone who experienced long devastation in her life. I'm not completely sure of her story but I do know that she grew up in a believing home. As a young person she had a faith in Christ but at some point in her life as an adult she experienced a separation from God. I'm not sure if she abandoned her faith or if she did something that she felt was unforgivable, but she walked away from the Lord. For decades my grandmother lived in this state of spiritual separation. It was as if she and the Lord were not talking to each other and she was cut off from him. But when I became a Christian and started to going to church more often, my grandmother started coming more often. I think at first it was just an opportunity for her to get out of the house more. But whatever the excuse, she began coming to church more often and listening to the sermons and learning. Finally one Sunday the altar call was given and my grandmother came forward. As she was walking up the aisle she said, "I never thought I would hear the voice of the Lord call me again, but I've heard Him today and I'm not going to turn away from Him." My grandmother was in her 70's and had been separated from the Lord for decades, but she experienced restoration that day. For years Jesus had been someone she did not know, but she came to know him that day as one who forgives and restores, and it transformed her. Whatever it was that had separated her from the Lord was dealt with that day and she walked in faithfulness with Him for the rest of her life.

This is what Isaiah is talking about when he speaks of the ancient ruins begin rebuilt, the places long devastated being restored. This is the justice of the Lord. He puts things right again because He Himself is faithful and true. He is the God of restoration.

What are the places of devastation that we know about? What about those things that have been devastated for generations? There may be places of

long devastation in our own lives. Jesus wants to bring restoration. If we want to make a difference in the devastated places of the world, we have to let Jesus bring restoration to our own lives first. Like my grandmother we have to be restored to a right relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We have to turn from our sins, receive the forgiveness that is possible through Jesus Christ, and we will experience restoration. Then we can see how God wants to work in our lives and in the world around us to renew the ruins and restore the places long devastated.

Once my grandmother was restored to a right relationship with God, she began reaching out to others. One of the things she used to do was go with a group from the church to the local nursing home every week to visit and minister to the people there. I remember calling her to talk and she would tell me she couldn't talk long because it was her day to go visit the old people at the nursing home and actually she was older than a lot of them were.

When we are restored to a right relationship with God then God will begin to work restoration in our relationships, in our families, and He will work through us in doing a work of restoration in the world. Pastor Peter and Christy are getting ready to go to Africa next month where they will work teaching and helping people to know Jesus and to live healthy lives and to experience a restoring in places of long devastation. The work of restoration is hard work. Peter and Christy are going to work really hard and may not see a whole lot of difference in the time they are there because the work of restoration can take a long time. God may work in a situation for years. We may actually pray for a work of restoration that we will never live to see accomplished. But God continues to work even after we are gone.

I know of a woman who prayed for years for her husband and children to come to know Christ. She died and after she died her husband and children were all saved. Her son became a minister and it was under his ministry that my grandmother came back to the Lord. We may never know just how thoroughly God will answer our prayers and how far beyond them He will go in bringing restoration to the world.

I want to invite the worship team up now and open up a time for prayer. What are the places long devastated that you are praying about? What are the relationships or the situations that need God's intervention? Maybe you've never asked Jesus to forgive you of your sins and restore you to a right relationship with God and you'd like to do that today. I invite you to come forward now if you'd like me or Pastor Peter to pray with you. Let's enter a time of prayer for the restoring work of God to be manifest among us.