

“A Word of Hope from the Prime Prophet”

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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(singing) “O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lowly exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!” Good morning! It is good to be with you! I am so glad the election is finally over and I am glad that I won, but I do realize that now I have to make good on my promises and that is not going to be easy. Still, with God, all things are possible... or so someone once said... and I believe it.

But it does feel good to have been elected to the office of Prime Prophet, not that prophetic ministry is competitive. We all speak for God and we are all humble folk, genuine wallflowers who would never seek out public recognition... I thought Amos might win this election; he is a strong leader. Ezekiel could have done a good job too. Now, Jeremiah is another matter completely. I mean, what a whiner! We all have challenges, Buddy, wake up and smell the hummus! And Jonah would have been a disaster, obviously! But there were many qualified people for this role. That people voted for little old Isaiah is humbling.

I have to tell you that since I won, I have been hard at work with my transition team to get things moving, to get people believing again. You know what a challenge this is. These are difficult times. But I know all about difficult times and those who have resonated with my prophetic vision over the ages, even Jesus whose birth you celebrate, have known difficult times. I guess that has been my role — to help people retain their hope in the midst of great challenges.

But, before I go any further, perhaps it would help you to know something about my context. This is a bit complicated. In fact, I thought this would all come out during the campaign and stir some controversy. You know how elections can be! The prophetic book linked to me is written in two different times. Those early chapters are written in the time leading up to and including the Assyrian conquest of

the northern kingdom of Israel, roughly 742 – 701 BCE. The prophetic ministry of this time addressed Jerusalem and Judea, the southern kingdom, people living in the shadow of oppression in the north.

But the latter chapters of my book, including your reading today, come from a very different time, the time after the southern kingdom had been defeated by the Babylonians and people had been living in exile. This ministry centered around the time the first exiles were returning home, roughly 539 BCE, when people were dealing with the realities of returning home to a place that did not feel like home, at least not at first. But then... I know you can do the math. “Let’s see,” you will say to yourself, “the year 742 until the year 539, hmm... that would make him at least 203. I knew he was old, but my goodness!”

The short answer to your question is — no, I am not that old! The answer to your follow-up question is — yes, there was more than one prophet used by God in these times and if you want to get yourself all in a tizzy about this, go ahead. Maybe I should not be the Prime Prophet. But if you want to know the truth, some of these other guys had some help too.

The main thing is that we spoke to people for God, we stood between heaven and earth, between divinity and humanity, and the words we spoke were and are still true. I would encourage you not to get bogged down here, but to try to understand the truth I have spoken and the context that gave rise to it. In regard to your reading today, we are talking about the year 539 BCE, the time when our people were returning home after decades in exile, a time when, as I have said, home did not feel like home.

Some of the people who were sent away died in that foreign land. Others were born there and thus knew nothing about our homeland, other than what they had been told. And when they arrived home, the land itself was not exactly in pristine condition. Wars had been fought there. Towns and villages had been turned upside down. I used terms like “oppressed” and “brokenhearted,” “captives” and “prisoners.” We had been all of that. And I referred repeatedly to those who mourned because we had mourned the time we had lost, the people who had died, the would-be, should-be familiar land that felt so strange to us now.

This was the context in which I proclaimed the message you know well. “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent 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 our God; to comfort all who mourn...” It was a wonderful message, a powerful message, a message full of hope for desperate people, people who were almost too afraid to have hope.

And yet, there were those who wondered whether I could make good on these promises. Perhaps I was like a politician promising the world to everyone without the ability to keep my promise! I even went on to talk about building up the ancient ruins and raising up the former devastations, repairing the ruined cities and the damage done in many generations. How could I make such promises?

I couldn’t, but God could, and that was what I said — the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring this good news to the people. It was God who promised to heal the nation, comfort those who mourned, free the captives, rebuild the cities — and if God promised to do it, who was I to argue? Further, I never claimed God would do this overnight. God would plant seeds of hope and healing, God would bring forth growth over time, God would call out righteousness and praise from the well-tended fields of human hearts.

And do you know what? Most people believed me, and more importantly, they believed in God. There were some naysayers. There were some people who were knee deep in a river of hope but still dying of thirst. I could not do anything for them. But for the others, the promise of freedom, deliverance and healing at the hand of our God, in good time, was enough to keep them invested in life. And in time that investment led to the rebuilding of our nation.

So, this was my message of hope and what it meant to the people who first heard it, and you would be interested to know that the man whose birth you celebrate, Jesus of Nazareth, actually took a liking to my work, particularly this message. In fact, my book may have been Jesus’ favorite book of the Bible and this fact alone could have had something to do with my election to the role of Prime Prophet...

But, be that as it may, Jesus viewed his own ministry to be a fulfillment of my prophecy that begins with the words, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me... to bring good news to the oppressed...” You remember the story. It is in your Bible, Luke 4. It is also the kind of thing that got Jesus in trouble, because if you pay attention to the message, it has a revolutionary feel to it, just like Jesus’ mother’s song, the *Magnificat*, with all of that business about bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly.

There is some of this spirit in my preaching which Jesus embraced, all this talk about helping the poor and oppressed. It sounds like the redistribution of wealth, and wealthy people in my day didn’t like this any more than they did in Jesus’ day or than they do in yours. My message was one of comfort and hope, but it came in the form of a promise that God would set things right for people suffering the most.

I proclaimed this message to exiles returning home in 539 BCE, but what does it have to say to you? Well, if it had nothing to say, I would not have been elected Prime Prophet. The message God gave me to proclaim is one that speaks to all people in difficult times, difficult personal times of loss and struggle, difficult times for nations. The message is that there is hope for healing and renewal, there is cause for joy even as you struggle, because God is still working to bring about righteousness and praise, justice and peace.

Maybe you have lost someone or something dear — a loved one, a job, a relationship, your home. It hurts deep down, I know, believe me, I know. None of us can understand exactly how anyone else feels, but we lost everything and wondered where God was in the midst of that loss. Even prophets wonder, but God was there even when we felt alone. God stayed with us when we felt no hope, peace, joy or love. And God eventually enabled us to experience renewal. God can do that for you.

Maybe you are discouraged by the world around you. You thought this pandemic was devastating after a few months — taking lives and jobs and unsettling life — but it has been almost a year now, and the end may be in sight, but it’s difficult to know for sure, and the normal you return to will be a new normal, home may not feel like home. You thought your culture had made progress in regard to racial differences,

but it has become quite clear that you still have a long way to go. Too many people are suffering too much. Your nation is divided, other lands are in conflict, human beings are destroying the earth, and the church — God’s great vehicle of hope and healing — is struggling.

Again, I know how you feel; believe it or not, I know. We suffered mightily too for a long time. And yet, we held on to the idea that God would one day exchange our mourning for the oil of gladness, our faint spirit for the mantle of praise. We held on to the hope that one day we would feel at home again in our homeland.

You can take courage in this very same hope. The God who anointed me is the same God who anointed Jesus and the same God who anoints every messenger of genuine hope in every place and time, including yours. Can you believe that? Can you believe there is still hope? Even if you cannot, God will still do what God is planning to do.

There is an interesting exchange in one of your movies... I do find your movies interesting. In this movie *The Count of Monte Cristo* an old priest is assuring a fellow inmate of God’s concern for him. The fellow inmate, Dantes, says, “I don’t believe in God anymore.” The priest replies, “Oh, but He believes in you.”

That is what matters, that God still believes in us even when we don’t believe in God. That’s what all this business about a child being born in Bethlehem is about. God still believes in humankind, God knows why, but God does! So, God enters this world, comes to dwell amidst all of the messiness, bringing grace and truth.

Anyway, thanks for allowing me to be with you and thanks for your vote — if you voted for me — and if you did not, that’s okay, so long as you didn’t vote for Jeremiah! Now that I am in this role, I have to do everything I can to bring hope to people living in despair. I trust that I have helped you in some way. Just keep moving forward one step at a time and keep trusting in God. You’re good people and God is great, you’re going to be fine. In fact, you may be the ones on whom the Spirit is poured now, the vehicles of God’s grace and truth in your time.

(singing) “O Come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lowly exile here until the Son of God appear. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!”