### “What Is Sown” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 17, 2023

**Isaiah 61:1–4, 8, 10–11**

1 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 broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. 4They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. . .

8 For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. . .

10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Welcome to the Sunday of joy, the Third Sunday of Advent. I hope all of you receive joy today, and then, share your joy with others. For our Scripture we have one of the most important—and most neglected—passages in the Bible, one that Jesus used to introduce his own ministry (Luke 4:18), drawn, probably, by the reference to being anointed. . . being sent to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, and to proclaim liberty to the captives. He would have recognized this as sounding like what his new ministry was already starting to look like.

Looking at the second half of today’s reading, you’ll notice that the voice changes. In verse 8, the Lord speaks, talking about his hatred of robbery and wrongdoing, and promising to bring an everlasting covenant. In verses 10 and 11 the human narrator speaks, starting with the joy that he has experienced being “clothed with the garments of salvation” (61:10), and culminating with the extraordinary positive message that “God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.” This is a promise of spiritual growth and righteousness for the whole human race. This is an underrated and important joyful promise. It goes against the more well-known, end-of-the-world scenarios of tribulation and judgment that we usually hear about.

Obviously, it will not be a simple or easy path to the destination of a praise-filled world. We will have to overcome things that currently blight the human race: robbery, lust for power, nationalism, war, bigotry, religious intolerance. These are like traps in

which people get caught. They will fade away as we grow in the path that Jesus teaches.

Jesus brings a way out of each one of these traps. He proclaims release to the captives of religious bigotry, if they become open to foreigners, as Jesus was open to Romans, Samaritans, Canaanites, and Greeks (Matt 8:10; 15:22; 28:19; Mark 7:31; 11:17; Luke 9:52–55; 24:47; John 4:40; 12:20–24). Jesus can provide spiritual insight to those who are blinded by prejudice and hate, but they have to let their hearts be broken, and recognize how toxic their prior ways were. They have to be humble enough to reflect upon their condition and admit their spiritual need.

That’s what I see in the wonderful line from the Leonard Cohen song, “Suzanne,” that says “only drowning men could see him.” Actually, let’s look at the whole setting. It goes “Jesus was a sailor, when he walked upon the water, and he spent a long time watching, from his lonely wooden tower, and when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him, he said ‘All men will be sailors then, until the sea shall free them.’”

A great Jesus passage, and it comes from a Jewish songwriter. It’s about needy people turning to the one who can save them in their deepest need, and then get them to join with him, which is pictured as becoming a sailor. I like the image of Jesus as a sailor, rescuing drowning people.

Now let’s return to the original image, that of God causing a garden to grow abundantly. Growing plants has always been a good metaphor for the growing spiritual character of believers. All parents know about growth as a constant and miraculous reality with their children. They grow like weeds: quickly and somewhat wildly. We also need to grow intellectually and emotionally, to become deeper in our thinking and more empathetic in our feeling. We *have* this life ahead of us. We have the promise and the mandate of growth. We *are* the children of God, and children grow.

Trust that God is the Father of our growth: the initiator, the supporter, and the destination of our growth. I think God is the source of our mind, not of every thought in our minds but of the mind itself, with its ability to reflect and to choose. When we make some spiritually significant choices, we can start to see signs of God’s guidance. Maybe you start to encounter persons who will be significant in your life, who reinforce a life-affirming direction that you are taking. The support you feel from some of your friends is probably plugged in to God’s support for you. And then, God becomes our destination. We start thinking about where we are ultimately headed, and about how God will fulfill his purpose for us (Ps 138:8), will complete the good work he has begun in us (Phil 1:6). We will grow into wiser, stronger, more loving children of God. And eventually the whole world will get on track, although we are far from it now.

There was a big achiever named Brad Strait who worked two jobs, owned his own construction company and worked part-time as a paramedic. He was always achieving “wins” in his life, he says (https://bradstrait.com/2016/03/04/my-story-or-why-did-you-ever-choose-to-be-a-pastor/). He liked volunteering at his church, and his friends there started telling him he would make a good minister. He went ahead and went to seminary, then university, while still working his other two jobs. Finally he quit those jobs and became a pastor. He realized that he had felt hollow inside, and only now did he feel free. Only now has he lost the need to be an over-achiever with many material wins in life. He has become less brash, more authentic, more comfortable in his own skin, more aware that only God, and not achievements, can fill the empty space in his heart. It is a story of personal growth and a gradual humbling.

I want to finish with another mention of the promise of Isaiah 61. Eventually, God will cause everything that is sown in the garden to spring up, and will cause righteousness and praise to sprout before all the nations. The human race will eventually become a beautiful garden. In the meantime we have to work to preserve civilization against the forces of barbarism. We have to resist robbery and wrongdoing. We have to avoid the prisons of religious bigotry and narrow-minded nationalism. We have to become more sure about what spiritual values really are, so we can dedicate ourselves to what is right and good and beautiful. The wins we need are victories over egotism, fear, and avoidance of the inward issues of our lives. If you fear and hate other religions, you are hiding from some of the inward issues in your life. Ask for Jesus’ help. I hope you find freedom in devotion, love, and service. God will make *your* garden bloom.