

### 13 December 2020, Advent 3: Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11

I mentioned last Sunday that December 6<sup>th</sup> is the Feast of St. Nicholas. Through the ages venerable Bishop Nicholas of Myra has been transmogrified into the caricature of “Jolly Old St. Nick”—the fat guy in the red suit, who bears little resemblance to the actual saint.

The real St. Nicholas lived in the Fourth Century. He is mentioned as one of the bishops at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD. His reputation as a gift giver came about in this way. There was a poor family without even a penny for the dowries of their three daughters, thus making marriage extremely difficult. When the eldest daughter was of sufficient age—around 13—her parents determined their only option was to sell their daughter (a common practice for the extremely poor). Bishop Nicholas heard of the situation and, in the middle of the night, secretly left a pouch of coins on the windowsill of the family’s shack. The parents used the money for their eldest daughter’s dowry, to provide her a good marriage. Bishop Nicholas did the same for the second daughter at marrying age. The parents had no idea who was leaving the bride-money. With the third daughter, the father hid himself for several nights and watched. One night he saw Bishop Nicholas steal up to the hut and place a pouch on the window. The parents were so overjoyed to learn who their benefactor was that, despite Nicholas’ pleas, they shared the identity of the one who rescued their daughters’ futures.

Now keep this incident in the life of St. Nicholas handy as I say something about today’s Old Testament Reading. God inspires Isaiah to prophecy that God’s people will be released from oppression, their broken spirits will be restored: instead of ashes there will be garlands, sorrow replaced with gladness. Isaiah prophecies: *They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.* Isaiah spoke during Jerusalem’s rebuilding after exile. There are things to do, specific actions for building up God’s kingdom; God’s people are co-workers in kingdom building.

Nicholas responded in grave circumstances; Isaiah spoke to God’s people in seeming insurmountable difficulties, calling them to rebuild a city in ruin. It is well for us to remember Nicholas and Isaiah as we look to Christmas. We are reminded that a true celebration of Christmas is living in specific ways, doing concrete actions for those with identifiable burdens, as servants of others, kingdom-builders with God and God’s people; and, if this can be done secretly, anonymously—we are in good company.

There is a great paradox about faith. Salvation in and through Jesus Christ is a free gift for those who believe in Him. Yet for faith to be real—that is, the really real reality of our existence—faith must be put into action day by day. What we do, say, and think, what we give and the ones to whom we give are the real stuff of faith. As we live our faith in action, through God’s infinite mercy, we become the glory of God.

Even in this interminable season of Covid-19 Christmas can be joyful; but if we are not in some way changed on December 26<sup>th</sup> and beyond, whatever our celebration, it was not really about Jesus Christ who calls us to join Him and all the saints in working for and building up God’s kingdom by serving those in need and necessity.

Isaiah says the people of God will be *oaks of righteousness* to show forth God’s glory. Our majestic Georgia oaks are both beauty and essential, giving shade and protection for God’s creature, a place for animals to nest and live. I hope you remember whenever you see one, “This is what God is growing me up to be, and that is what I want to be.” May your preparations for Christmas be faith-in-action; may the gifts you give and receive bring joy and be life-changing for you and your loved ones. May you be transformed yet more through the power of God at work in your life. And together may we build God’s kingdom in our every environment. May God’s kingdom come in us and through us.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, now and for ever. Amen.