

Third Sunday in Advent

GARLAND FOR ASHES

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Third Sunday in Advent (Year B)

Analysis by Marcus Felde

*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;
2to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3to 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.
8For 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.
9Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;*

*all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
10I 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.
11For 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.*

DIAGNOSIS: Ashes (v. 3)

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : All Messed Up

The pericope gives us abundant language to describe the predicament of the audience. They are oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, mourning, faint of spirit, devastated, and so on. They are victims. Their lives, even though they have escaped Babylon, match the ruined buildings in their environment. There is really too much to do; they feel helpless.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : How Did We Get Here?

Not only are their lives a mess, but, as they have been hearing for umpteen years, it is their own darn fault. They have no one to blame but themselves. The prophets—antebellum, duringbellum, and afterbellum—were always telling them that such were the consequences of failing to trust in God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : Ashes

The prophecy walks a tight rope when it cites “the vengeance of

our God.” Yes, that’s a horrible recompense to experience. The question now is whether that is still all the people are going to receive. Will they continue to be a people of whom it is said (contra verse 9) that “they are a people whom the Lord has cursed”? Because that is certainly what all the evidence points to at this moment. Absent something—and it will have to be a word, a promise of some sort—this people is toast. Burnt toast.

PROGNOSIS: Garland (v. 3)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Instead, Garland*
Here is the word they were waiting for, made (fairly) sure—here in the promise of this prophecy. “All who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.” This points forward, to a culmination yet unseen but devoutly to be desired. That sign awaited a person who could say with authority “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news . . .” That one, promised in Isaiah, arrives in Jesus who, though he appears on the cross to be ruined by sin and death (like the cities, v. 4), is instead the offspring who is known among the people (v. 9). He proclaimed the Lord’s favor over all who would receive it. He was “the planting of the Lord,” who displayed “his glory” so that the whole world might be part of an everlasting covenant (v. 8).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Advanced Solution) : *Waiters*
Sunday before last, a reading from earlier in this chapter of Isaiah said that “God . . . works for those who wait for him”. We do. We hear the promise in Isaiah, we see the fulfillment in Jesus Christ, we taste the body and blood, we smell the coffee, and . . . we wait for God. Alertly, busily, gently. “Wait staff,” I guess they could call us. Awaiting not a final verdict, not our doom, but our Lord.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *All Blessed Up*

Camping in the umbra of his glory, we shine as the Lord did: we wear his garland, borrow his "Oil of Gladness," wear his mantle of praise, and stand up straight and tall like the Oaks of Righteousness we now are. Because the spirit of the Lord God is out of the bag. In ruined environments, we are not victims but the ones who are bringing peace, in his name.