

Isaiah 61:1-11
They Shall be Called Oaks of Righteousness
WRCoB 12.13.20

I have a video clip I want to show you.

It is from [YouVersion Bible App](#)

It shows key word search trends for the Bible in year 2020.

Let's watch it.

<https://youtu.be/UCPoRSCjdbE>

According to the app, in the year 2018, Joshua 1:9
Was the world's most visited verse.

Joshua 1:9 NIV “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

2019 saw another passage take first place
As the world's most favored Bible verse.

Philippians 4:6 NRSV Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And now for the notorious year 2020 (drum roll, please)
The most read Bible verse in the entire world
Goes to Isaiah 41:10

Isaiah 41:10 NLT Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.

What I think is interesting

With these three most popular verses

Is the common themes between them.

Don't worry

Don't be discouraged

Don't be afraid.

Rather, be strong, be courageous

God is with you

God will strengthen you

God hears your prayers.

These particular Bible verses tells us something

About what people are currently feeling.

Worldwide, people are anxious and insecure.

This year the Bible app saw searches increase 80%.

And what's kind of cool in the video

Is how the key-words searches

Correspond to current affairs.

An article in Christianity Today speaks similarly.

Bible searches spiked corresponding to major events, with “fear” becoming the app’s top search term in the first few months of the year, “justice” in the spring, and “healing” trending throughout the year.

These key words corresponded to the rise of Covid in March
The murder of George Floyd in May
And healing throughout the year.

The key words, racism, justice, and oppression
Spike to 100 times the average
In the week following George Floyd’s death.

Overall, 43.6 billion chapters were read through this app
A half a billion Bible verses shared through social media.

So what does this all mean?

It means that people are searching for God
And are looking to the Bible for truth and wisdom
Strength, peace, hope and joy.

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I said last week
I wanted to look for what God is doing silently
As the world makes its thunderous racket.

So here is one place where God is planting seeds.

The world is in search of meaning.

You and I know meaning
From the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus!

We've heard today's Scripture Lesson before.

Jesus used it as his Scripture Lesson
For his first sermon as he began his ministry
Recorded in Luke 4.

But let's look at the context of the passage.

Isaiah wrote it during the time Israel returns from exile.

Israel's time in exile, though of great suffering
Was a time of great faith-building.

They returned to Jerusalem eager to rebuild the city
Eager to rebuild their lives.

They returned with a deeper faith and understanding
Of who God was and what God desires.

And here was the chance to rebuild their city and society
In a way that more closely resembled God's kingdom.

A second chance, a new beginning.

Here is an opportunity to rebuild in such a way
That could prevent them from repeating the injustices
That were present in the past.

Pretty cool, wouldn't you say?

An opportunity to get it right!

Filled with hope, the people returned from exile.

Excited to begin anew.

Determined to build a right and just society
With God as the architect.

But architects do not do the building, do they?

They design.

The people do the work of building.

In this way, the people's hope is not a spiritual hope
Though it originates from the Spirit.

It is a more practical hope.

For the people of Israel will be the builders of a new society.

Hope is found in their hands as well as their hearts.

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So, who will do the work of building a new order?

It is not the CEOs of the world
Not Mark Zuckerberg of Face Book
Nor the White House, Senate or House.

According to our passage
Who is doing the work of reconstruction?

It's the ones receiving the good news.

The oppressed, the brokenhearted
The captive, the prisoner the poor
And those who mourn.

All who have been oppressed and marginalized
In the previous unjust social order.

Isaiah 61:4 They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastation of many generations.

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Imagine you were an enslaved person
At the end of the Civil War.

The war is over and you are now a free person.

A new beginning has come.
A time of reconstruction waits before you.

How would you feel reading this passage?

Or this?

Isaiah 61:6 . . . you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory.

What kind of hope would stir within you?

For God to give you, specifically and strategically
The opportunity to shape a new society.

A new world order that is no longer oppressive or unjust

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It seems clear here

That those who had been on the receiving end
Of oppression and marginalization

Are the ones to do the rebuilding.

Doesn't Jesus says that when he says

The first shall be last and the last shall be first?

And the reason for this is because it is the last

Who know what life was like as the oppressed.

The kingdom of God will be built

Not by the oppressor but by the oppressed

Isaiah 61:7 Because their shame was double. And dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs.

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.

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Do you see where I am going with all this?

Do you see how this all fits?

Today, we, too, are in exile.

Life as we knew has been disrupted

The three main factors being
The pandemic, social, and political upheaval.

In the midst of our current experience
God is doing something . . .
Several things actually, as I see it.

As I stated at the beginning of my sermon
There's an increase in people's search for meaning.

In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center
20% of American adults
Started watching religious services
For the first time remotely
During the pandemic.

Of the 80% who regularly watch services online
34% watch their own service plus another's.

This is something new.
This is of God.

God has expanded the reach of the church
Making something good out of a difficult situation.

Secondly, God is pushing us
To grapple with the ongoing issues of racism
That continue to be hurdles for people of color.

God is placing in our hearts
A desire to build a more just and equitable society.

One of my colleagues in the VCC Antiracism Team
Charles Williams, a person of color
And layman for the Catholic Church

Told the group this week
That he has been busy leading workshops on racism
Every week since George Floyd's death.

When asked how many he led before Floyd's death
He answered, "none".

All the churches requesting his leadership
Are predominantly white congregations.

God is at work.

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God is using this disruption in our society
As God used Israel's exile in Babylonia
To rebuild faith.

And it is Jesus who leads the way.

Because the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him
God anointed Him the Christ

To bring good news to the poor
To proclaim release to the captives
And to let the oppressed go free.

God invites us to be actively involved with Jesus in this.

We are coworkers with the marginalized
To build a new society.

And his work is called kingdom building.

Now's the time.
Here's the opportunity.

God doesn't wanted us to go back to "normal."

We need to grab this opportunity.

We must be open to the time before us
To be a different kind of church
To help to right wrongs currently before us

We must take heed to what God is doing
By following Jesus the ultimate builder of a new reign
The reign of God.

Isaiah 61:11 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.

The time is now.

Let those, kingdom builders, be called oaks of righteousness
For they shall repair the ruined cities
The devastation of many generations

Lord Jesus, may it be so.