

I took my first mission trip when I was in college. I was so excited because many of my friends were missionary kids and I had heard amazing stories about what their families were doing for the name of the Lord. Right before going to college, I had joined a new youth group, where many of them had been on trips around the world as well. So over Spring Break of 2006, a small group of us headed to Russia.

And nothing went as planned.

We had some issues with some of the places we were supposed to serve, so the first few days we spent sight seeing around Vladmir, and I was so disappointed. This is not what I had in mind when I signed up for mission work! Where’s the action! Surely this isn’t what God wants us to be doing with our time.

By day 3 our plans were back on track. And almost the first questions out of everyone’s mouths were: “what do you know of our history and what did you see that represents it?” For the Russians we were trying to build relationships with, their history was vitally important. If we hadn’t “accidentally” had all that time to see sights, no one would have listened to a word that we would have said.

That experience fundamentally changed my approach to mission and ministry.

Missions, or rather the ultimate mission of the Lord, is what the prophet Isaiah is trying to proclaim to the people in this section of scripture, along with salvation. Which raises some pretty important questions. First, what are we saved from? If I asked you that question, most of us would probably answer something along the lines of sin. We are saved from the punishment that we deserve for the sin in our lives. Which is absolutely true. But notice what the Good News that Isaiah is proclaiming is for - liberty to the captives, healing to the brokenhearted, release to the prisoners, and comfort for those who mourn. For Isaiah, the Good News both offers salvation to come and salvation here and now in ways that transform our lives.

The second question is what are we saved for? Many folks would probably say to spend eternity in heaven, which once again is true. But noticed that Isaiah is talking about being saved to transform the world here and now as well. Our salvation is lived out in a way that matters deeply here and now, my friends, for we embody, as the hands and feet of Jesus, the healing, liberty, comfort, release the prophet is lifting up.

In fact, we don’t just embody them, but they are part of our mission as Christians which defines us. How many of you have ever done something for someone else, only to have them ask why in the world you were doing so? I have had that happen several times, and it becomes an opportunity to share the faith. Our missional efforts transform lives *and* give us an opportunity to talk about the “why” of salvation, over and over and over again.

Because our salvation, it isn’t just for us. It is meant to be shared. Isaiah here is talking about the Year of the Lord’s favor, which is also known as the Year of Jubilee. It was to take place every fifty years and was to be the ultimate Sabbath. Debts were to be forgiven. Slaves set free. Land returned to its original owners. Land lay at rest, so it can naturally replenish itself. This year would be a witness for the grace and mercy of the Lord, a mark of salvation.

Only the Year of Jubilee never actually took place, even if scripture said it should. Which made it so radical when Jesus stood up in his hometown in Luke 4 and read this passage from the prophet Isaiah, and said “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The people were not happy for a lot of reasons. First, we like this passage when it is about God showing us mercy, but when it is call for us to show mercy to others - that starts to

make us feel uncomfortable. We like being about the mission of God when it is within our comfort zones, but when we are called to go place and meet people that make us feel a little leery, we shy away. Maybe even something in this scripture passage made you ask “did God really mean *those* people?” The specifics about how wide God’s mercy goes can be challenging for us.

Second, to actually be about the mission in Isaiah 61 requires us to change as well. It speaks to the condition of our hearts that prevents us from sharing the Good News with those listed in this passage. For us here and now today, it is a reminder that it isn’t just about coming to church and being nice, its about *being* the church and witnessing to the work of God in the world.

Flannery O’Conner is an American novelist and short story writer who was known for saying rich and profound things that can take a while to wrap your mind around. One such statement is this, “All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.”

We like grace when it is just about being forgiven. But when grace changes us, when grace makes us people with a mission, well that can be painful at times.

Friends, we are deep in the season of Advent at this point, where we are preparing our hearts for Christ coming. It’s a time when we soak in the joy, hope, and anticipation of the season. But it also is a word of challenge. We aren’t just preparing to see the Christ child on Christmas Eve, we are preparing to be transformed by Christ the Lord, here and now. And then to go out and share the Good News of that transformation with the world.

So I wonder, where do you see God’s transformation revealed today? How do you see God restoring our broken world today? And how has God transformed and restored you? Because the questions are so deeply connected for the prophet Isaiah and for us as believers in the living Christ here and now today.

Because mission isn’t just about going places or sending money. It’s not just about how we bless people this particular season. It is how we live into our salvation year round. It is about being a people of hope and joy and peace, even when it is hard. It is about how we bear witness to what our Lord is doing.

Let us pray...