

3 Advent Yr B, 11/12/2011
Isa 61:1-4, 8-11
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“Everyone needs to be rescued”

Have you ever been rescued before? Or have you ever thought you needed to be rescued? If you were rescued from someone or something, how did you feel towards the one who rescued you? Did your being rescued change the course of your life? I think those are the sorts of questions that our passage from Isaiah stirs up in my heart, mind and soul. The more I think about the need to be rescued, the more I realise that everyone needs to be rescued in one way or another.

Oskar Schindler, immortalized in Steven Spielberg's 1993 prize-winning film, *Schindler's List*, was a man who rescued the oppressed and brought them new life. He was born on April 28, 1908, in Moravia, Austria-Hungary, now the Czech Republic. After completing his education, he worked as a commercial salesman, changing jobs many times during the 1930s. He tried other businesses, but soon went bankrupt due to the Great Depression, which gripped Europe at the time. Though a citizen of Czechoslovakia, Schindler started to work for the German military intelligence service, eventually joining the Nazi Party in 1939.

As an opportunistic businessman, he sought to profit economically from the German invasion of Poland in 1939. He gained ownership of a factory in Krakow that manufactured enamelware. Schindler was given 1,000 Jews to work in his factory under almost slave-like conditions. Initially, it seems, Schindler was motivated by money in his business dealings, but after he witnessed a raid on the Krakow Ghetto in 1942, where soldiers rounded up the Jewish residents for shipment to concentration death camps, he began to change. A persuasive man and with many skills, he began to overtly protect his workers, referred to as

Schindlerjuden (Schindler's Jews). Often Schindler called upon his charm and ingratiating manner to help his workers get out of difficult situations. On many occasions, he bribed the local German commandant to look the other way. He spent his whole life savings obtaining food and other necessities for his workers. Although arrested by the Gestapo on two occasions, he was able to affect his release so he could continue his work at the factory and, thereby, protect his Jewish employees.

In October 1944, with the Russian army bearing down on Poland, Schindler was able to move his 1,000-person workforce to another factory in Brunnitz, in occupied Czechoslovakia. This plant manufactured anti-aircraft munitions for the German Wehrmacht. In May 1945, the Russians moved into Brunnitz. As a member of the Nazi Party, Schindler was a marked man and, thus, he gathered his employees together for an emotional leave-taking ceremony. He told the people, "My children, you are saved. Germany has lost the war." Oskar Schindler had saved over 1,000 Jews. He rescued them from the darkness and brought them into the light.

Oskar Schindler used his money, influence, and position to answer his Christian call to rescue over 1,000 Jews from probable death at the hands of the Nazis during World War II. His efforts clearly illustrate the basic theme from Isaiah in today's first lesson. It also properly shows how we must respond to God's Son, Jesus, who came to rescue us from fear, problems, and death. As we await his coming in time at Christmas, we must ponder how we will respond to the call to assist others that comes from the newborn king of the Jews.

Oskar Schindler was a great hero, earning the distinction "Righteous Among Nations," the highest award the state of Israel can confer on a Gentile, for his rescue of over 1,000 Jews during World War II. He saved his workers and gave them new life when death was all around them.¹

In our Isaiah passage, the prophet is addressing the exiled people of Judah who have recently returned home from their seventy year Babylonian exile. Life had been difficult for them and so the LORD, speaking through his faithful prophet gives them a Good News message after having to live in a bad news situation for so long.

The prophet speaks of a future full of promise, hope and joy. A day when God's "anointed" one would carry out his rescue mission. The words of this prophetic oracle are familiar to us Christians—since Jesus, you remember, read them during a synagogue worship service in his hometown of Nazareth in Luke chapter four. When he had finished reading this passage, he declared: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The exiles of the prophet's day, the folks of Jesus' day, you, me, everyone needs to be rescued. There are places and circumstances that human beings find themselves in which they cannot get out of by themselves—they need a rescuer. The prophet promises that those who are oppressed shall have good news brought to them. How the oppressed are in need of good news! For example, think of the situation in a place like Darfur—where the people there have suffered for a long time and the world seems to have forgotten them. Think too of how they would respond to a rescuer who brought them good news and then actually delivered them from their oppression. They would be filled with joy.

The prophet then speaks of a rescuer who shall bind up the brokenhearted. During this time of the year, when we celebrate the joy of Christmas; think of those who are brokenhearted; those who have lost loved ones; those who are going through a difficult divorce; those who have lost a job; those who have been diagnosed with a life-threatening disease; those who have lost their possessions due to some natural disaster. Such brokenhearted folks are all in need of healing. Think too of

how they would respond to a rescuer who would have the power to reverse all of these tragic losses. They would be filled with joy.

The prophet goes on to say that God's rescuer would proclaim liberty to the captives and release to prisoners. Think of all the prisoners of conscience around the world who are unjustly locked up in prisons. Many of them are Christians and Jews who have been persecuted and thrown in prison simply for being a Christian or a Jew. Think too of how all of those innocent prisoners would respond to a rescuer who gave them their freedom and was able to release them from prison. They would be filled with joy.

Now the prophet comes to the heart of the matter, by promising that a rescuer shall come to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of God's rescue mission. [The word "vengeance" according to some Hebrew scholars is more accurately translated as "rescue."] The year of the LORD's favour is a reference to the Jubilee year—the fiftieth year. According to Leviticus twenty-five on this year, among other things: land was to get a rest, debts were to be cancelled, and land purchased within the past fifty years was to go back to the previous owner. Such reversal actions were to ensure that Israelite society was a just society; where all were to be treated equally and fairly.² Think of how our nation and every other nation would look if we actually practiced the principles of the biblical jubilee year. Think of nations where everyone was able to be treated justly, equally, fairly. The joy would be contagious.

The prophet goes on to speak of another promise, the rescuer shall: comfort all who mourn; to give to those who mourn in Zion a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. Think of that—those who are full of sorrow and grief, wearing their funeral clothes. Suddenly God's rescuer comes and reverses the situation, turns their sorrow and grief into a wedding celebration where everyone has a garland around their necks.

Why? Because, guess what? The rescuer is the Messiah! So its party time! Take off those funeral clothes and put on the wedding clothes! In the words of the prophet; God's people, you and I among them shall be clothed with the garments of salvation, covered with robes of righteousness. What a party! What a celebration! What a wedding—God the bridegroom, married to his bride, his chosen people, you and me among them! The joy shall be contagious, everlasting joy, when the Messiah comes. And let the people say: Amen! Come Lord Jesus!

1 Richard Gribble, "Jesus Rescues Us," at: <www.esermons.com>.

2 According to some scholars, it is uncertain whether the Israelites ever actually practiced the jubilee year.