**The Reclamation Project**

**First Baptist Church, Albemarle**

**December 11, 2016**

 I am one of those guys. It is almost a game to me a lot of times. I will go out of my way (to a certain length) if I can save two pennies a gallon at a gas station. Now mind you, my car only holds 13 gallons if it is on empty. At most, I am saving $0.26 cents but the amount is beside the point. It is a matter of principle! If one gas station can sell the same gas for a couple of cents cheaper, than why can’t the gas station next door sell it for the same price?

 That is why I love the energy-efficient CFL light bulbs! You know the kind I am talking about. It looks like a twisted strand of spaghetti stuffed into the socket. Now you have the types with the twisted strands enclosed in what looks like a traditional bulb. These CFL bulbs use far less energy and lasts much longer than the traditional bulbs. The only problem is that the technology within the CFL bulb includes small amounts of mercury, which is toxic to our environment.

 So what do we do with the CFL bulbs when they finally do burn out? In trying to conserve energy and money, we have created an environmental issue. Enter a company named Total Reclaim. This South Seattle company takes expired CFL bulbs and totally recycles (or reclaims) every part of the bulb. The mercury within each bulb is handled with care. The rest of the bulb is broken down and reused. The bulbs and ballasts are broken, extracting the glass. Then the glass is sent to the breaking chamber, where the mercury powder inside is trapped and reused. As for the ballasts, they go to the company's electrical equipment recycling plant. Total reclamation!

 In today’s text, we find a reclamation project of a different sort. On the surface, at least, it would seem that modern Israel is achieving what God had promised its ancient ancestors. God had promised another group of returning Israelite exiles that they would experience another total reclamation project in the land: "The desert shall rejoice and blossom abundantly; like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing" (Isaiah 35:1-2).

 However, the project Isaiah is talking about in this week's text is much bigger than just achieving the ability to grow flowers in the sand. What the prophet reveals is God's reclamation project for the whole world -- a reclamation project that was initiated in Israel but would soon be shared everywhere; *a reclamation project that would not only restore the land, but all of God’s people as well*.

 God’s people had been overtaken, captured and dispersed throughout the different lands. Some of the exiles returned to Israel within a generation. Others took much longer to find their way back to the Promised Land. Yet even when they did return, they found themselves in a land still under the domination of other nations. The people continued to live under a cloud of fear, even in the days of Jesus. It was clear that the promise Isaiah prophesied had not yet come true.

 Isaiah’s message was that of joy. Verse 4 begins with “say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear;’” Is that not the same message of the angels that came to Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds? “Do not fear!” “Do not be afraid!” We do not have to be afraid in this world because the Lord is come. God is with us.

 Isaiah proclaims that God makes all things possible. The blind will see; the deaf will hear; the lame will walk; the mute will shout. (v. 5-6) God provides the water for the thirsty and food for the hungry. However, God desires to do more than meet our physical needs. God desires transformation. God desires total reclamation for his creation!

 As we await the birth of Jesus during this Advent season, we are reminded that Christ’s birth in the manger was the in-breaking of God’s total reclamation project. It was the beginning of God reclaiming his creation, never letting go of us even in our unsalvageable state. God made a way through Jesus.

 When we read Isaiah 35 through the lens of Jesus, it transforms the message. Jesus went into the dry wilderness for 40 days but was not conquered by it. He found food and sustenance in God and revealed God's glory in himself. Jesus strengthened "feeble hands" and calmed the fears of the anxious and broken. He opened the eyes of the blind, unstopped the ears of the deaf, called the lame to walk, opened the mouths of the mute. He became "living water" for those dying of spiritual thirst (John 4), and proclaimed that he was "the way" in which people return to God (John 14:6). Finally, Jesus faced the "ferocious beasts" of human sin at the cross, and yet returned from the dead, bringing the kingdom of God to earth.

 The Reclamation Project did not end with the resurrection of Jesus. As God would have it, He asks those who have been reclaimed to help reclaim others. In his life, death and resurrection, Jesus lived out God's reclamation project and taught us to do the same. He called the project the kingdom of God and proclaimed it as the already-and-not-yet completion of the restoration of God's people and God's good creation. And, he promised to return and complete that work, ushering in a new creation where all of God's people will finally experience God’s kingdom in the full.

 If we take God’s reclamation project seriously, we can easily see ways God is asking us to join him in the mission. We join God in meeting the physical needs of those near us and around the world. We provide enough food and clean water to those who lack these basic needs. We promote ways to reclaim God’s creation by conserving, recycling and reusing. We advocate for those who have been marginalized by extending a hand-up to the poor, not by just giving things away but investing ourselves and our resources in order to walk them out of poverty.

 Not only do we participate in changing the social structure of our community but we also participate in their spiritual transformation. We create a "Holy Way" for people to come to know Christ and his kingdom through ministries of evangelism and hospitality. This is what we do when we support our missionaries.

 However, that is not enough. We are also called to the ministry of evangelism and hospitality individually and corporately. The message of Christ should be in our hearts and on our lips on a daily basis. We cannot abdicate our personal responsibilities to the Church. We have to personally be ready to share what God has done and what God is doing in our lives. We need to show Christian hospitality; a sense of acceptance rather than judgment and an invitation to a Christian relationship with one another. Hospitality is more than just sharing a meal together. It is our willingness to share our lives with one another; a willingness to walk through the valleys of shadow of death and the mountaintops of joyful singing.

 During Advent, one of the words we focus on is PEACE. Peace is not just the absence of war or hostility. Matter of fact, when Jesus is referred to as Prince of Peace, the Hebrew word for “peace” is *shalom*, meaning general welfare for all people. That means that the ministry of Jesus focused on the general welfare of all people, not just the elite. In Jesus, the welfare of a person included the physical, emotional and most importantly spiritual.

 In Luke 19, As Jesus triumphantly entered into Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion, Jesus wept over the city. He wept, not because he knew he was going to be crucified, but he wept because the people were blind to what would bring them peace. I dare say, the world has yet to open its eyes. Peace requires the capacity to forgive. Peace requires a readiness to share generously. Peace requires the end of racism and classism. Peace requires taking care of the marginalized and the vulnerable. Peace requires humility in the face of exaltation for the first will be last and the last will be first.

 I wonder if we are ready to receive peace in our lives and extend peace to others? Jesus came to reclaim the world and to bring peace through his kingdom. He has reclaimed us in order that we can make a way for others to be reclaimed. Will you join him in this mission?