

3rd Sunday of Advent (Year B)

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

*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 broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;
to 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.
They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.*

*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.
Their 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.
I 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.
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.*

If you look back into the laws of what we call the Old Testament, you will find a peculiar little instruction that is given to the people of Israel. It's called the Year of Jubilee. The Year of Jubilee happened every 50 years. It's pretty simple: after 50 years the community "reset" button is pushed and all debts are forgotten. Those members of the community that had found themselves in an inescapable downward spiral of indebtedness were given a fresh start. Land that had been sold to pay off debt was returned to the original owner. Prisoners who had been incarcerated for failure to pay debt were released and reintroduced to society with dignity and respect. This was done in joy and, well, jubilation! In fact, the word Jubilee comes from the Hebrew word, *yabal*, which was the word for the trumpet that the Israelites used to signal the beginning of the Year of Jubilee.

What would happen, I wonder, if we heard that trumpet today and responded as the Israelites were commanded? What if the next time we heard the test siren from the Fire Station down the street it really meant that God was ushering in the year of Jubilee for all residents of Shelter Island. Debts would be cleared. Folks with debt would gain equity. Those without it would lose equity. The Food Pantry we house in the room next door wouldn't be needed because the gap between the rich and the poor would be closed. What would happen if the Year of Jubilee was observed here on the Island?

I suspect many of us would be glad. A fresh start. A new beginning. A chance to finally pursue dreams that have, until now, been chained in silence by the reality of society. I expect the sound of jubilee from the trumpet would be echoed by the voices of many on this island.

I also suspect that many of us would feel cheated. The years of careful financial planning, fiscal conservatism, and business savvy decisions all for naught! The interest gained on lent money now disappeared. I expect the sound of jubilee from the trumpet would ring painfully in the ears of others on this island. As Flannery O'Connor once said, "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful."

So, why a year of Jubilee? Because God knows that humans, when left to our own devices, tend to settle into a default economic position of benefitting at the expense of others. Therefore, every 50 years, God gives everyone a clean start to remind all involved that we are all really in this together and loved equally in the eyes of the God who gives us breath.

Today's passage from the book of Isaiah is an allusion to this biblical proclamation of the Year of Jubilee. When Isaiah says, in verse 2, that he is sent to proclaim the "year of the Lord's favor," he is using the practice of the Year of Jubilee as a metaphor to describe the coming Messiah.

*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 nations.*

Sounds like good news to me! Righteousness springing up! Fruitfulness and faithfulness abounding! But is it a sure promise or an empty hope? Sure, the Year of Jubilee sounds nice and pretty on paper but it's a silly thing to think it would work in reality! Whose reality are we talking about? Our's or God's? You see, that's what makes Advent such an important time - because it is when we prepare for God's reality to meet our own reality. We are preparing to hear the opening sound of the Year of Jubilee - only this time it will not be signaled by a trumpet but by the cries of a newborn baby.

We, as disciples, prepare for the coming of Jesus by acknowledging that we are caught in the tension of existing in an imperfect world while simultaneously proclaiming the coming of a perfect savior who proclaims good news to the poor, glad tidings to the sad, liberty to the captives, and release to all who are imprisoned.

As disciples, we anticipate the coming of something perfect and holy and joyous. We anticipate a different kind of Jubilee year - one that doesn't simply happen once every 50 years. You and I are called to embrace the Kingdom of Heaven and to embody an *eternal* Year of Jubilee that brings about a community that has no need for a bi-annual reset button. A community that is committed to justice, integrity, compassion, and faithfulness. Now this isn't a community where everyone looks just alike or acts alike or even has the exact same amount of money. This is a community where everyone is in their place and has the ability to live their lives in the fashion intended by God.

And if you and I are to take God's intentions seriously, then we have to take seriously the call given to us in Isaiah 61. As we anticipate Jesus and his eternal reign of Jubilee, we must seek out God's desire for the oppressed to be given good news, for the brokenhearted to be made whole, for the captives to be freed, and for those who mourn to be comforted. Those things, my friends, are our job description. This passage in Isaiah reminds us that our true mission is to respond to salvation. Our true mission is to give comfort where it is needed, food where there is hunger, water where there is thirst, good news where it is craved, clothes where there is nakedness, and freedom to those who are oppressed. When we forget this, we cease to be the church.

If you and I keep these people and their needs on the forefront of our mind as the Year of Jubilee calls us to do, then everything else will fall into place. And that is the truth that Advent reminds us of year after year - that the joy we find in God and the joy God finds in us is a joy which surpasses all other things in this world. It is a jubilee that cannot be described in words alone but must be embodied by actions!

If God only talked to us about sending his son to be with us, it would give us little reason to celebrate Christmas. We celebrate Christmas because God *actually* came to be with us and for us! God invites us to do the same for others! May you and I continue to work together to the day when there will no longer be a need for a restart. May you and I continue to give this community even a glimpse of the beautiful jubilee that has been promised and will be fulfilled. Amen!