

Isaiah's Good News
Isaiah 9:2-7, 61:1-4,8-11
Luke 4: 16-21

Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 9:2-7, 61:1-4,8-11

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

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 brokenhearted, 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.

Luke 4: 16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes

of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This is the third Sunday of Advent. We’ve, perhaps, gotten used to the tree up front, and the Wise Men have made it as far as the railing between the Upper Room and the downstairs Sanctuary. They will get up here eventually, though it will take them a while.

We’ve heard some words from Daniel and some from Joel – both of them Old Testament prophets whom we don’t hear from very often. But the words this morning from Isaiah – those are familiar words. Those are beautiful words that have been part of many Christmas pageants and Christmas Eve services over our whole lives.

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” These are wonderful words, describing a wonderful reality.

Isaiah is speaking to a people who have just returned from exile in Babylon. They found a country devastated. The splendor of Jerusalem is no more; all that remains are the ruins of the long dead past. Some of the people who return are older people who were taken as children into exile. They find that the weed-covered ruins of today don’t look much like the beautiful city they remember from childhood. The rest are younger people who have never seen Jerusalem. They are disappointed when what they see

does not match the perfect city that they have heard described. Both groups see a city that will take years of hard work to make the place decent to live in, much less beautiful.

Isaiah is speaking to a people who have been punished by God, and who feel like they are living in a land of deep darkness. They are oppressed. They are brokenhearted. In some ways, they are still captives, captives of fear and captives of long-standing pain.

To these people, Isaiah preaches good news.

Good news for the poor sounds like having what they need, even though they clearly do not have that today.

To these people, Isaiah preaches wounds bound up and wounds healed.

To these people, Isaiah preaches liberty and the year of the Lord's favor.

Isaiah tells these people of a savior who will come and bring all of these things.

Isaiah is not talking about himself.

Isaiah is not talking about anyone whom he will ever see in his lifetime.¹

Isaiah is talking about the coming of the Messiah, the one sent by God to save God's people.

Isaiah speaks of the Year of the Lord's favor, or the year of Jubilee. In Leviticus 25, we learn that the Year of Jubilee is something that was supposed to happen once every 50 years.

¹ There are layers of meaning in Isaiah's prophecy. At least some of it can be interpreted as speaking about the coming of King Hezekiah, but millennia of Church scholarship say that Isaiah was primarily speaking about the coming of Christ.

“The fiftieth year will be a Jubilee year for you. Do not plant, do not harvest the secondary growth, and do not gather from the freely growing vines because it is a Jubilee: it will be holy to you. You can eat only the produce directly out of the field. Each of you must return to your family property in this year of Jubilee.”²

Every fifty years, God commanded a reset. The land was to be given a fallow year, and allowed to rest. All land was to be returned to the family to whom God had given it when the Israelites first came into the Promised Land. Divisions among God’s people would be healed, as the rich became less rich, and the poor became less poor. God’s people would become more equal, and more of a single people, together. God’s people were supposed to celebrate God’s amazing goodness to them, and God promised that they would have enough.

To be clear, there is no evidence that such a celebration ever took place, in the hundreds of years of history of God’s people in the Holy Land. Maybe it did, but it is not recorded in Scripture.

In any case, Isaiah is saying that a time like that is coming.

Jesus read Isaiah and proclaimed this year of the Lord’s favor in his first sermon. I’m sure, at least some of his listeners understood him to be promising that everything would return to the good old days. You know, the Romans sent back to Rome and a good Jewish king on the throne and all the dishonest priests and scribes sent packing. But it did not happen that way.

² Leviticus 25:11-13.

The people who originally heard Isaiah preach these words did not rebuild Jerusalem exactly the way it had been before. It did not happen that way then, either.

Maybe the Jubilee is not about who sits on a throne or about ownership transfers on real estate parcels. Maybe the Year of the Lord's Favor is about something else, and we can get glimpses today.

On Thursday, November 9, 1989, I came out of lunch in the student union at the College of Wooster, a short drive north of here, and I noticed that all the televisions in the place were showing the same thing. At first I was confused – it was a night scene, and I saw people dancing, but it was lit poorly. The soap operas that I expected to be showing at that time of day would have been brighter, even if they were showing night, so that we could see the actors' faces clearly.

I noticed German street signs in the background. I turned up the sound on one television. Those of us who were there in the union that day learned that the gates in the Berlin Wall had been opened. The people we saw dancing were East and West German teenagers and young adults, dancing together on top of the wall. The wall itself came down soon after.

Wounds had started being bound up, and healing could begin.

We got a glimpse of Jubilee.

A few months later, a gray-haired gentleman walked out of Victor Verster Prison in South Africa, and into history. After twenty-seven years in prison, Nelson Mandela

was a free man.³ He immediately started working to free his countrypeople from the imprisonment known as *apartheid*.

Prisoners were released.

We got a glimpse of Jubilee.

This last August, the first scheduled airline service from the United States in half a century arrived in Havana, Cuba.⁴ Some trade sanctions were released, meaning that the Cuban economy may gain benefits of trade with the United States, and families were able to be reunited.

Good news was brought to the poor, and old wounds could be bound up.

We got a glimpse of Jubilee.

People of God, the Messiah is coming. He has come, and he is coming again. He will bring with him Jubilee, the Year of the Lord's Favor, in its completeness. A child will be born for us, a son given to us. Authority will rest upon his shoulders, and he shall be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

He has sent his servants to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release to the captives, to comfort all who mourn. Those servants call that doing the work of the church.⁵

³February 11, 1990:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nelson_Mandela#Victor_Verster_Prison_and_release:_1988.E2.80.9390

⁴ August 31, 2016:

http://www.oregonlive.com/commuting/index.ssf/2016/09/alaska_airlines_flights_from_l.html

⁵ Matthew 28:16-20.

The servants of the Messiah will build up ancient ruins. They shall repair the ruined cities, or the blighted ones, neglected for generations. All who see these people of the Messiah shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.

My sisters and brothers, to misquote William Gibson, the Year of the Lord's Favor is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed.⁶ We can catch glimpses of it from time to time.

So, if we want to be the people of the Messiah, the followers of the one who is coming, what do we need to do?

We need to watch for those glimpses of the Jubilee.

We need to watch for opportunities to bring good news to the poor, and to stand with them.

Opportunities to bind up the broken-hearted.

Opportunities to proclaim liberty to captives and to release prisoners.

Opportunities to stand with those on the margins of society.

Opportunities to comfort those who mourn.

And we need to take those opportunities.

Isaiah's good news for us is that God can work through us, and God can extend those glimpses of the Jubilee until they fill our lives, and fill the world.

⁶ "The future is already here — it's just not very evenly distributed." – William Gibson. NPR article, November 30, 1999.

Let it be so.

Come, Lord Jesus, Come.

AMEN.