

Isaiah's Hope  
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11  
Luke 4:16-21

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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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.

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.'

Last week the prophet Joel told us that we need to return to God with our whole hearts and be rewarded with the Spirit of God. This week we're getting at the question of "and then what?"

Isaiah is writing to a people in exile. He's already told them that they will get to return home. God is concerned, and Isaiah is concerned, with HOW they will return, and HOW they will live upon their return. If they go right back to doing everything the same way as they did before they went into exile, worshipping idols, ignoring God's word, then the same thing is going to happen again. One definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result.<sup>1</sup>

So Isaiah tells the people how they should set up their community when they get back to Jerusalem, and how they should live. He tells them that, if they will do things the way that God tells them to, that God will reward them richly. "Give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning."

He tells them that they will be able to build up the ancient ruins and restore the glory of the City. He tells them that they will be so prosperous that, instead of being slaves, they will skip right over being ordinary farmers — they will hire people to do their farming!

God promises to make an everlasting covenant with the people. In this covenant, their lives will be so good that everyone who sees them will have to acknowledge that God has blessed them.

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<sup>1</sup> I have heard this attributed to Albert Einstein and to Bill Wilson of Alcoholics Anonymous fame. No matter who first said it, it is truth.

Isaiah proclaims that it is time for the year of the LORD's favor, the year of Jubilee. This goes back to the original law, back in Leviticus, when the people of God first entered the Promised Land. You see, God told Moses that, when the people entered the Promised Land, even the land got a Sabbath. Every seventh year the land was to lie fallow – no planting in the fields, no pruning the vineyards. The people's diet might change for a year, but there would be enough food. Modern scientists say that this would help the land produce better harvests, as the land recovered nutrients. The ancient Hebrews did it because God said so.<sup>2</sup>

Then, after every seven times seven years, the fiftieth year is to be the Year of the LORD's favor, or the Year of Jubilee. All slaves are to be released. All debts are forgiven. All the land that God gave to the various tribes on their entry in the Promised Land goes back to those tribes and the various families within those tribes, no matter who it had been sold to in the past fifty years. The result is that everybody has enough to live on, and nobody owes anything to anyone but God.

That sounds radical. Because it is. The word "radical" means going to the basics, the fundamental nature of things. God's people are not supposed to live just like the people around them, always looking to gather amass more treasure at the expense of others.<sup>3</sup>

You can find all this in Leviticus, Chapter Twenty-Five. Please, look for yourselves, and remember it the next time you hear someone talking about Biblical values or Judeo-Christian values.

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<sup>2</sup> Yes, this is kind of like a child brushing their teeth just because Mommy said so – if they are doing the right thing, does it really matter why?

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 6:19-21.

By invoking the year of Jubilee, Isaiah says that the people, when they return, need to make a completely fresh start.

This passage from Isaiah is the text that Jesus chose for his first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. Just like Isaiah's audience, his hearers would have known what the Year of the Lord's favor was. It was kind of the mission statement for his ministry on earth. He brought good news to the poor, release to the captives. He proclaimed release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. He proclaimed a new covenant and the year of the LORD's favor, the year of Jubilee.

Like the people Isaiah spoke to, we are in a sort of exile right now, aren't we? We are in our homes, isolated from where we would all rather be. We are separated from people whom we love. Hundred of thousands of people have died from the coronavirus, and nobody knows how bad the long-term toll is in terms of mental health for those of us who have managed to avoid it.

I tell you, truly I tell you, we WILL return from this exile. We will worship together in the sanctuary again. We will return to being able to physically gather with our friends and family whenever we choose.

But let's not rush to get everything back to so-called "normal." Let's think about how we return, and what we return to. As Matt Haig pointed out, our old world of long working hours, stressful commutes, hectic crowds, too many choices,

mass consumerism and twenty-four-seven everything may have been what we were used to, but it was not exactly Heaven on earth.<sup>4</sup>

I ask you, let's use this time of separation to rest. And then let's all learn from this time of exile, and make a fresh start. A fresh start in each of our own lives. Looking for more balance and better attunement to God's priorities for us.

Let's also look at how we can best be God's church on Schoolhouse Lane:

- Loving God with all that we have and all that we are.
- Loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- Bringing good news to the poor, and release to the captives. The captives of poverty, of addiction, of despair.
- Bringing recovery of sight to the blind, seeing where God is at work around us and helping others to see it, too.

We're being given a once-in-a-lifetime chance here for re-evaluation. Let's not waste it, either in our congregation's life or in our own.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Matt Haig (@matthaig1) for pointing this out on Twitter.