

The Year of the Lord's Favor
Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
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*Today's sermon will take shape a bit differently than most. We will begin by hearing four stories, with Scripture woven throughout. As we begin, I invite you to listen for the reading of the Word of God within the Proclamation of God's word.

A man embarks upon an extensive trekking expedition, in fact, he is the leader of a large group traveling in the wilderness. As a boy, he never imagined that he would be one to embark upon an expedition of this magnitude. He was just an orphaned boy, taken in by a kind woman. He doesn't possess any extraordinary talents, yet he has managed to safely lead his group to the base a mountain. He leaves them behind to set up camp and begins to climb this high, steep, and craggy mountain. He finally arrives at the summit. The air is very thin and in the hours surrounding dawn, it is very cold at the top. Once he has settled in, he stays a while to take in the view. While waiting, he hears a voice and this voice tells him many things. After several days of listening to the voice and admiring the expansive view, he hears these words:

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the after-growth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

A young man finds himself back in his homeland after it has been conquered and taken over by another nation. He only knows what life was like in his homeland from stories. He wasn't even alive when his family was exiled from their land, yet for him it is still home. His people have begun the joyful, yet trying process, of rebuilding their nation, including its religious center. The holy sanctuary where they worshipped God was destroyed in the war. In the midst of this work of rebuilding, this young man is given words of hope and encouragement to share with his people:

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;

One Sabbath day, a man goes to worship with his home congregation. He has been away for a while. As one of the leaders of his faith community, he stands up to read a scripture lesson for the day. It takes him a moment, but he eventually finds his place and begins to read:

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.

He then sits down. After a few moments of silence, he begins to expound upon the passage

he has just read. At first, the people of the congregation are amazed—a local boy all grown up and offering an eloquent lesson based on God’s Word. But they soon become angry with him, so angry in fact, that they run him out of town, even attempting to kill him by throwing him off a cliff at the town’s edge.

One Sunday morning during Advent, a church family gathers for worship. And worship looks different than it ever has before. Once again, the option before them is to gather around screens in the comfort of their homes and to seek God and one another from a distance. They should be comfortable in pajamas and newish WPC coffee mugs, but they just aren’t. Because they’d rather be together. They’d rather things were back to normal. Everyone is doing fine on the surface. But some have lost jobs. Others are exhausted from continually navigating what’s okay and what’s not. Some have buried friends or family members in 2020 – some from COVID and others not – but the ways they had to mark their deaths left us wanting. Some are dreading Christmas because it will highlight just how different things are this year, while others are desperately trying to hold onto some semblance of normalcy and joy. But most all are tired of this year. A year of quarantining, social distancing, great disappointments, and masks. A year of painful realizations, social upheaval, and grief. Regardless of the circumstances, these people have chosen this family of faith and they have gathered to worship the Lord. These are the words they hear:

*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.*

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 61. **Thanks be to God.**

These four stories are connected and are part of our collective story of faith. The first story is about a leader named Moses, chosen by God to guide the Hebrew people into the Promised Land. He heard the words of God about the Jubilee year after he received the law, including the Ten Commandments, from God on Mt. Sinai. The words we heard in the context of that story are from the 25th chapter of the Leviticus. They are words that have to do with right living in the land that God has given to his people and honoring God as the giver of every

gift. The second story is about a prophet named Isaiah who conveyed the Word of the Lord to the people of Israel after they had returned from exile in Babylon, roughly 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The words that Isaiah shares with the people of God are words of hope. They are hopeful for the future rebuilding of Israel. The third story is about the Messiah of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Jesus spoke these words in the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth 2000 years ago. The Gospel of Luke tells us that he visited the synagogue in his hometown towards the beginning of his ministry in the region of Galilee, after he had been baptized and resisted temptation in the wilderness for 40 days. The fourth story is about us. It is about you and me, the places where we find ourselves and God's Word for us today, in the year 2020.

The year of Jubilee is a concept that is introduced in the book of Leviticus. In his instructions to Moses after the Israelites have escaped oppression and slavery in Egypt, God ordains that every 50th year in the Promised Land shall be full year of Sabbath. The word "jubilee" in this context literally means "to blow the ram's horn". During the 50th year, all land shall lie fallow, meaning no tilling of the land, no planting or harvesting of crops. The start of this year would be signaled by the blowing of the ram's horn. The Israelites need not worry about what they will eat in the year of Sabbath, for the Lord will provide enough for two years in the 49th year. In addition, all slaves shall be released from the bonds of slavery, even those whose debt of slavery was life. Furthermore, through Moses, God encourages people to have a year of right living: do not cheat one another, do not sell food to those in need for a profit, do not force those indebted to you into slavery. The year of Jubilee is intended to remind the Hebrew people that they belong to God, that all of their blessings are from God, and that God is their caregiver.

For Isaiah, there was a need for a long overdue year of Jubilee. You see, the year of Jubilee was never put into practice. The ram's horn was never blown in Zion. According to the prophets of the Old Testament, the reason that Israel was conquered by the Babylonians was because they did not live rightly in the land of God. They sinned in a myriad of ways, widening the chasm between themselves and God by the minute. They are returned to their land only because of the Lord's mercy and love for them. Though they are returned to the land promised to them long ago, the returned exiles face a challenge. The walls of the city of Jerusalem have been destroyed, as has the center of their religious life, the Temple. There are divisions between the few who were never sent into exile and the great number of exiles who have returned. Through the words of Isaiah, the people of God receive a reframing of the year of Jubilee. Isaiah calls it "the year of the Lord's favor". A year full of promise, hope, and peace. Notice that the perspective of Isaiah 61 changes several times. At the beginning of the chapter, the prophet is speaking about how the Lord is using him. Beginning in verse 3, the prophet mentions the tasks that are given to the people of God. In verse 8, we hear the voice of the Lord. Through these different perspectives we learn that the year of Jubilee is a time for God and God's people to work together in the task of restoration. And that restoration includes institutions like the Temple and people like the broken-hearted and imprisoned. It includes mending relationships with God and neighbor. It encourages God's people to let God take care of them and to extend that care to others.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus Christ brings a whole new meaning to the phrase "year of the Lord's favor". He himself represented the ultimate "year of the Lord's favor". Through Jesus's

ministry on earth, captives were released, prisoners were freed, sight was restored, and good news was shared with the poor. These weren't empty words for Jesus. He actually coaxed demons out of people, freeing them from prisons of their bodies and minds. He healed those who couldn't walk, releasing people who were captive to the physical limitations of their bodies. He restored sight to those who had been blind since birth, giving them the gift of vision. Through his teaching, he attempted to free people from the spiritual blindness, poverty, and captivity that comes with a lived suffocated by sin. And he invited disciples and followers to join him in the work of proclaiming the Lord's favor to people and places in need.

Life in 2020 does not look like a year of the Lord's favor most of the time. In fact, the weekly news magazine that arrived in my mailbox on Monday declared 2020 "THE WORST YEAR EVER." We don't have garlands, the oil of gladness, and mantles of praise. We exist in the land of ashes, mourning, and faint spirits.

People we love are battling trials of mental illness that are exacerbated by the pandemic. There is a deep divide in our country's political landscape that is affecting familial relationships, neighborhood connections, and dinner table conversations. Violence and oppression, especially against people of color in our nation, never seems to cease. It leaves us wondering, do Isaiah's words that are based on the law given on Mt. Sinai, that were re-interpreted by Jesus, have any meaning for our lives today? Jesus was born, crucified, and raised from the dead so long ago that the grand idea of a year of the Lord's favor seems to have died and been buried with him and not raised.

Perhaps we should think back to the stories from earlier. If you'll recall, the fourth story was about us. It was about our community of Westminster Presbyterian Church and all the things that make us who we are at this point in time. The words of Isaiah are words for us, in this very moment. They really are. Even if 2020 is the worst year any of us have ever lived through. Just like God was present with Moses and the Hebrew people in the wilderness and Isaiah and those returning from exile (and those weren't great circumstances), God is present with us now. That's what Jesus' life here on earth was all about – God being present with us. And even though we are awaiting Christ's return once again, God is present with us. God has never left. We may feel like Charlie Brown Christmas trees and not "oaks of righteousness" that are planted by God's very hands. And we probably don't feel like those "clothed with the garments of salvation" because we're still living in our yoga pants and house slippers. But we are. We are God's planting. We are God's delight. And we have work to do on God's behalf and with God's help. My seminary professor Bill Brown puts it this way, "God's comfort of Zion is inextricably tied to Zion's restoration." God comforts us by giving us a task to complete. Our work may not be constructing a new Temple or raising a wall, but it is building – building up this body...the saints of the Lord at Westminster Presbyterian Church and building up God's kingdom all around us. And we're doing it, y'all. We really are. We're committed to one another, despite the challenges. This fall, we've collected mountains of goods to fulfill the needs of three different mission partners in our community. We've welcomed new members, we've called a new Associate Pastor, we've turned in our pledge cards, we've prayed for one another, we've baptized saints of all ages and celebrated the Lord's Supper, we've depended on God's word, and we've prepared the way this Advent. We are preparing the way this Advent.

Perhaps you're like me and you've decorated your home, lit the first two (now three) candles on your Advent wreath, and have been reading your devotions. You've prepared.

You're preparing. Well, I want to offer you more me more way to prepare. And it comes from the words of Isaiah 61. I challenge you to reframe this year. To look at 2020 not as the worst year ever, but as the year of God's favor. Because we're alive. We've made it to December. We're part of a church family and there's a baby on his way. And he is born for you and me. He is born for the whole world. And he will grow up to teach us and heal us and call us as his own. He will give his very life for us. And he invites us to give our lives for others in response. Hmm, 2020...the year of the Lord's favor. Thanks be to God. Amen.

