

Sermon – December 17, 2023
“The Year of the LORD’s Favor”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words. Jesus, fuel our continuing transformation into your image with these words and lead us out into fruitful labor in your mission right here, right now. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen

The Spirit of Jesus in me greets the Spirit of Jesus in you, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Good morning! Did anyone check on Amazon last week for a John the Baptist figurine to add to your nativity set? Advent is almost over. Our anticipation that Jesus is coming might be growing and with its growth, joy should begin to rise up in our hearts, not the joy the world too often associates with the coming of Christmas and the giving of gifts, but the joy that comes from entering into the joy God has for His people, that is, everlasting joy. People get ready. Jesus is coming. He is coming back again. Christmas is near. Our celebration of the coming of the word made flesh is upon us. Open our hearts to receive the gift God has for us.

This morning’s scripture reading should have a familiar ring. You might be thinking you have heard these words before. You are correct. The benediction we use is in part from these verses, except we use plural pronouns to remind us that we as followers of Jesus are to be the body of Christ here in this place and are to be doing the things Jesus did. We are to be out in our community proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor. I would like to help us grow in our

understanding of our benediction by sharing a connection with the Old Testament. These words we speak each week have a connection to the Old Testament that might not be part of our awareness. We may be aware that Jesus reads this scripture from the book of Isaiah when he begins his ministry. Jesus will read these verses and state that he is God's Messiah, the anointed one to come, by saying he is the fulfillment of these words. He is the anointed one who will not simply stand in a synagogue or a pulpit and shout out the words of Isaiah to be heard, but he will act. He will actually do what the words say God's anointed one will do when he comes. Jesus says he will be God's instrument to bring about the words he has proclaimed.

The connection we may be unaware of with the words of the Isaiah passage and the connection I would like to help us become aware of starts with the words, "the year of the Lord's favor." The year of the Lord's favor in the Old Testament connects us to the year of the Jubilee, a very special year in the rhythm of the worship of God by God's people. Let me explain the year of Jubilee for those who are not familiar with this idea. Recall that when God created the heavens and the earth, He created for six days but on the seventh day He rested. Six days God worked and on the seventh He rested from His labor. When God gave the Ten Commandments, among them is the idea of seven days. We are to honor the sabbath, the seventh day, and keep it holy. Six days we are to work but on the seventh day we are to rest, to refrain from our work. The seventh day is a day of rest given to us by God. It is a day we are to do no common work. The sabbath is to be for us a day of rest. The sabbath is a great gift. Sabbath keeping is a command from God but sabbath keeping is not the topic for today's sermon. I will save that for another sermon. For today, keep in mind that sabbath is a gift from God to God's people. Sabbath is not something we earn; it is a gift we receive. What we want to remember today is that there is a cycle of seven days that is connected to God's plan for our lives.

Next, we need to understand that God had a plan for the land to give it rest as well. The plan for the land was based on seven years. Six years the land was to be worked, planted, and a harvest collected, but in the seventh year, the land was to rest, to lie fallow. The people of Israel were to follow a cycle of seven years so that the land may have rest and to let God provide for them in the seventh year.

And then there was another cycle of seven that God gave to Israel. After seven times seven years, which is 49 years, came the 50th year, the year of Jubilee. The year of Jubilee was a very special year, a year when the unimaginable was to occur among God's people. It is a hyper

sabbath year for the people of God. The first thing that was to happen in the 50th year was freedom. God's plan for the 50th year was for it to be a year of freedom. All aspects of the lives of the people of God would experience freedom in the year of Jubilee. In the year of Jubilee, every debt was to be forgiven and all land was to revert to the original owner. Land, the source of income and substance in an agricultural society, was sold only when the circumstances of one's life had reached financial desperation. But in the year of Jubilee, the land was to be returned to the owner. The freedom aspect does not end with the forgiveness of debt and the return of land. All people who were slaves were to be set free. As God set the people of Israel free from their slavery in Egypt, so the people of Israel were to live this out in the year of Jubilee and set free the slaves they held. Can we see how the year of Jubilee would be good news to the poor? Can we catch the idea that when one proclaims the year of Jubilee, there is proclaimed freedom for captives and release from darkness? Hopefully, those words begin to take on new meaning. The words, "the year of the Lord's favor," in our benediction now have new attachments for us to consider. We have a new filter to use when we hear Jesus read these words from Isaiah or when we hear them as our benediction.

We might also realize that even in the time of Israel's beginning as a nation, most people lived long enough that they would experience the year of Jubilee at least once in their lives. Not only does the year of Jubilee bring freedom, but it also brings hope. For those in slavery, there was hope for an end to their slavery. For those in desperate financial circumstances, there was hope for relief. God had given His people a radical gift that would allow them to experience freedom and hope no matter their circumstances. Debts that were so large they could not be repaid would be forgiven. God brings into the life of His people the rhythm of hope. There is a built-in protection for God's people to keep them from poverty. There is forgiveness of debts and hope for recovery from its impact in one's life. There would be no permanent loss of a family's inheritance of the land. The family farm would return to the family. The people of Israel would always have hope for a new start in the year of Jubilee.

Jubilee sounds really good, doesn't it? There is a problem though. There is no evidence in scripture that the people of Israel ever experienced the year of the Lord's favor. There is no evidence that Israel ever kept the year of Jubilee. There are some examples we might find that contain the idea of Jubilee, such as the way the early Christians in Acts 2 would sell their land to meet needs, but there is no example to point to in the scriptures to indicate that the year of

Jubilee ever occurred in the history of Israel. This radical idea from God that was to bring security and hope was never practiced. And that seems sad to me. Hope and freedom that God planned were never brought forth. Now, in defense of the people of Israel, if we will think about the logistics, it is not hard to understand why that was the case. Think about the implications of the year of Jubilee. Those in power who are owed money would lose their money. Those who had access to free labor would lose their labor. Those who had control of the country would lose control as they returned to their land and others did as well. Think about the idea of debt forgiveness in our own country's recent history when the government decided they would forgive student loans. Quickly, the details of loan forgiveness got messy. Questions arose such as, "Who gets the money? Who pays the money? What is the right thing to do? Where does the money come from to repay those who made loans?" Time, circumstances, and life cause complications to such ideas. The messiness of this loan forgiveness idea in our history helps us to understand the far more complicated idea of implementing the year of Jubilee in Israel and changing land ownership.

Let me take us this morning to Luke chapter 4:16-21 where Jesus begins his ministry, "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.'"ⁱ Jesus' statement that he is the fulfillment of this scripture is a very short sermon, but it is one of the most powerful proclamations ever made. In light of what we now know about the idea of Jubilee, think about what Jesus has done. Jesus has just told the people of Nazareth, who would understand the Jubilee aspects of this scripture, that he is the fulfillment of the Jubilee, that he will bring good news to the poor, he will set the captives free, and he will give sight to the blind and free the oppressed. Jesus is claiming that Jubilee is fulfilled. He has come and will bring about the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus, as God's anointed one, will not simply proclaim the words of scripture. He will act to fulfill them. Remember that the people of Nazareth react negatively to

Jesus' proclamation and his dialogue with them following his sermon, and they nearly kill him. Jesus will go throughout Judea and surrounding areas healing those in need and sharing this Good News. And in the fullness of his ministry, Jesus will die to set us free from our sin debt, a debt that we cannot pay, a debt for which we have nothing to give to God in order to repay. Jesus will fulfill all of the requirements needed to pay our debt and set us free from sin and death and reconcile us to God. Jesus fulfills the words of the prophecy. The baby born in a manger will bring about Jubilee for us, for all people. The year of the Lord's favor has come. Angels will proclaim to shepherds in the field at Jesus' birth that they bring Good News of great joy "for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."ⁱⁱ That which Israel could not keep will be fulfilled, has been fulfilled, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The radical vision of righteousness God has for His people is fulfilled through Jesus. Jesus comes to change everything, to proclaim, and then become, the means to bring the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus, the anointed one, came as a baby. Through Jesus, freedom comes for all people from a debt we cannot repay and hope comes to those who have no hope of ever being free from sin and its consequence, death. Expect a Jubilee in our lives. Look upon the coming of the Christ child with new understanding of what the Lord's anointed one brings: freedom, forgiveness of our debt, and hope, radical ideas beyond what we can imagine. Christ has come. Christ is coming again. Let us prepare our hearts to celebrate his coming on Christmas Day and to receive him and the hope and freedom God gives to all people though a baby born in a manger. This is the news of great joy the angels proclaim. The year of Jubilee has come; the year of the Lord's favor has arrived. Realize, if we can, what it means for us, for the world, that Jesus came in a manger on Christmas morning. Let the joy of the season fill our hearts and become our praise. Let us exchange gifts as signs of our joy with all whom we love and cherish. Let us be forever changed as we realize we have the opportunity to proclaim to the world that the year of the Lord's favor has come.

Pray with me: Father, we give thanks that you gave to us your favor first seen as a baby born to Mary in a manger. Jesus, come into our lives and set us free from our bondage, releasing us from our debt and opening our eyes that we might see to follow you and proclaim to those who have not heard the good news of the arrival of the year of the Lord's favor. Give us hearts of joy that we might forever celebrate this good news of great joy and that we may have hope for the year of the Lord's favor. Amen.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.

ⁱ Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (pp. 3110-3111). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3104). Zondervan. Kindle Edition