

ADVENT PEACE
Isaiah 61:1-4

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I have been haunted by a conversation I wasn't able to finish. It happened earlier this year, at a wedding reception. Dinner was over, and people were mingling, walking around, talking to one another. Next thing I knew, a man had seated himself next to me and launched right into a conversation about his church and his belief system. "You know, the church I go to is following the Bible. When we see that people are disobeying God's laws, we call them out on it. We love the sinner but hate the sin." And on and on he went; his monologue included telling me about the condo and boat he owns on a country club on the lake and the house he owns in Florida. Just when I was ready to speak, to question him about his assertions about the Bible, to tell him that I had a much different understanding than he, the band started playing. Very loudly. And I was not able to say a word. He went back to his seat, feeling, I'm guessing, quite satisfied about how the conversation had gone. It haunts me that he thinks that his is the only way for a Christian to believe. It disturbs me greatly that he might think that I agree with him.

If you claim that you live your life according to the Bible, you are making a bold and audacious statement. The Bible calls us to live in an upside down world, a world where the best seats at the banquet go to the poor and the oppressed, the prisoners, and the brokenhearted. The Bible calls us to a world where justice is not just a nice word, but our lifelong job description. If you live your life according to the values of the

Bible, you'll be uncomfortable, you'll get in trouble, and you probably won't be very popular.

There's no better passage than our passage for today to give us a glimpse of what the biblical values really are. If you were here last week, or if you read last week's sermon or watched it online, you remember that we talked about exile, the people of Israel being told to plant gardens and put down roots in Babylon. Well, that exile didn't last forever. Just as Jeremiah said, the people of Israel eventually returned home.

This part of Isaiah that we read today comes from the time of the return. These words remind the Hebrew people of how they are to live as God's chosen ones, what their values are to be. It is their mission statement.

The prophet receives a message from God and shares it with the people who have returned home. They were so excited to be home, but things were different. They'd been gone a long time. In the interim, other people have lived in their homes. They've lost their sense of community and identity. All of that has to be rebuilt. So the prophet says, "As you go about this massive task of repairing your cities, here's what you need to remember. You need to remember who you are." The prophet continues, "God's spirit is with me. God has told me to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed, to heal the brokenhearted, to set free all those who are captive and imprisoned, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The year of the Lord's favor is not just a symbolic designation - it is part of Jewish law. Once every fifty years, there is a year of Jubilee. During that year, all debts are forgiven and all property is returned to its original owners. Stop a minute and think about what that means, how that would work, how it would feel. The year of jubilee is

very good news indeed to those who are in debt. But it might not seem that way at all if you were the person to whom money was owed. The idea is to level the playing field. The jubilee year was a way of re-setting the economic system, making everyone start over, because...it was believed that a just and peaceful world, a world of harmony, a world of shalom, was impossible if there was a large divide between the rich and the poor.

Can you begin to see how radical and disruptive the Biblical message is? How threatening it is to those who have? To those who have money and power and privilege?

Isaiah says to the people, "It's the jubilee year. We are going to start our new life back in our homeland in a spirit of jubilee. We are going to rebuild in a way that is fair and just. And as we do it, you will discover joy, because living rightly, living in righteousness, brings a joy like nothing else."

Jesus is born in Bethlehem, grows up in Nazareth, learns scripture at the feet of the rabbis in Jerusalem. He is baptized by John in the River Jordan, is tested in the wilderness, and then is ready to begin his public ministry. He returns home, to his hometown of Nazareth, to his home synagogue, and steps up into the pulpit to deliver his very first sermon. He chooses, as his scripture text, this passage. "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to heal the broken hearted, to free the captives and the prisoners, to proclaim that this is the time of Jubilee."

Let me read to you what happens next. This is from Luke, chapter 4. Here's how the people respond to Jesus' first sermon: "When they heard this, all in the syna-

gogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.”

This is not a message that people want to hear. Just who does this Jesus think he is?, the people of Nazareth were thinking...who does he think he is, telling us that we need to release people from what they owe us...

Who he thinks he is is, who he knows himself to be, is another messenger from God, like Isaiah before him. Someone who knows that there is only one way to peace. Jewish law was written as a way to establish an ideal community, one in which people lived together in harmony. “[What Jewish law knew]... is that you cannot have a viable, peaceable, safe urban community when deep poverty must live alongside huge wealth, when high privilege is visible alongside endless disadvantage in health and housing and education. You can have some inequities, but the inequities must be curbed by a practice of neighborliness that knows every day that rich and poor, haves and have-nots, are in it together and must find ways of being together as neighbors in common.”

If we want peace, this passage from Isaiah is our mission statement and our job description. It calls us to a new way of understanding the world. In this new way, we see that mission is not primarily something that goes out from God’s people - by sending money or sending missionaries - but something that defines God’s people. We exist alongside and for the sake of the oppressed, the brokenhearted, and the imprisoned. We will all rise together, or ... as it has been said... we will all perish together as fools.

Here’s something else that haunts me even more. It is not only that I didn’t have the opportunity to engage in conversation with the man at the wedding. It is that I felt superior to him. He was bragging about his wealth and his possessions and that made

me feel like I was the better person. I felt morally superior. The truth is that we are, all of us in this room, incredibly wealthy and privileged compared to the vast majority of people in the world today. If there was a jubilee, we would stand to lose the most, in terms of our material and financial holdings.

But this passage isn't just about economics. It's also about joy. It's about the joy and the gladness that comes when we live according to God's values. I don't know about you, but I long for that joy and that gladness.

During lunch with a friend this week, she asked me, "What do you most want this Christmas, personally? What do you long to experience?" And, without thinking a second, I answered, right from my heart, "I want laughter. I want to sit around the table and talk and eat and play games and laugh with the people I love. I want joy this Christmas. I am so tired of all of the bad news. I need a break from it. I need joy and laughter."

God wants us to live in peace. And that includes inner peace. God gives us life as a gift and wants us to enjoy it, to experience true abundance - not the abundance of things, but an abundance of the spirit, a sense that life is worth living.

The antidote to the anxiousness we feel is to be a part of the solution. To keep our minds and hearts open to ways that we can create a more just and peaceful world. To hold onto what we have more lightly, with open hands, so that we can give more easily, share more freely. To find ways to build up our cities, as Isaiah tells us to do, as Jesus tells us to do, until they are places where all people can live together in a sense of well-being, and this...this is the path to joy.

You see, jubilee isn't just good news to the economically poor. It's good news to all of us who are held captive. We who live in prisons of our own making, so caught up in the values of this world that we have forgotten how to live freely. It's a beautiful word, isn't it, "Jubilee"? It just sounds like something you want in your life.

You may resist this idea of leveling the economic playing field with every fibre of your being. I resist it, too. But I am committed to keeping an open mind and heart because here's what I know. The way we are living now isn't working. It's not working for the poor, the homeless, those children who go to school in grossly inadequate buildings. And it's also not working for us. We're depressed and anxious and unhappy and we eat and drink and shop to try to make ourselves feel better. We all long for an experience of jubilee abundance.

There is a better way, a way that leads us towards peace and joy.

Let us pray. Holy God, open our hearts and minds to your wisdom and your ways as we await the coming of the prince of peace. Amen.

References cited: Inscribing the Text, W. Brueggemann, Feasting on the Word