

### 3rd Sunday in Advent

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; John 1:6-8, 19-28; I Thessalonians 5:16-24**

Traditionally, the third Sunday of Advent emphasizes the coming of John the Baptist and of the prophetic tradition. That is the emphasis in these selected passages of scripture, as well.

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11.** This is one of the best known statements that appears in the Old Testament. But it is so well-known, not because of its use here in the book of Isaiah, but because of the use made of it by Jesus of Nazareth to launch his ministry.

“When Jesus 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. Then he began to say to them, “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”” (Luke 4:16-21).

Luke 4:16-21 is the pivotal passage of the Gospel of Luke. It is the mission statement of Jesus. The remainder of Luke is the acting out of the Scripture Jesus read in the synagogue that Sabbath day. This passage is the key to understanding the agenda of Jesus.

In this, his inaugural sermon, Jesus uses Scripture to describe what his ministry is going to be about. Jesus tells his listeners he has come to (1) proclaim good news to the poor; (2) set captives free; (3) recover the sight of the blind; (4) set at liberty those who are oppressed; and (5) proclaim “the year of the Lord’s favor”.

This well-known passage from Isaiah 61:1-2 is notable for the differences between what is actually written in that passage and what Jesus read. Isaiah 61 doesn’t include a key phrase that Jesus spoke that day, “to let the oppressed go free.” Jesus added that line from Isaiah 58:6.

But what is most notable about Jesus’ reading is that whereas Jesus ends his quotation of Isaiah with the words “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor”, the text actually continues with the closing phrase “and the day of vengeance of our God” (Isa. 61:2). In other words, *Jesus stopped reading this scripture in midsentence!* That, in turn, placed the emphasis not on the judgment that God will visit upon God’s people, but on the proclamation of “the year of the Lord’s favor”. *That* was what Jesus wished to leave the listener focused upon.

What is “the year of the Lord’s favor” that Jesus wanted so strongly to proclaim? And why does the proclamation of that year result in captives being freed, rights being restored to the oppressed and empowering news being shared with all who are poor?

The “year of the Lord’s favor” was a biblical way of referring to the jubilee. Both Isaiah 61 and 58 are universally recognized as passages about the Year of Jubilee. Both “to proclaim the year

of the Lord's favor" and "to let the oppressed go free" were jubilee expressions. Jesus was proclaiming to Israel a Year of Jubilee!

The word *jubilee* literally means in Hebrew "the blowing of the Ram's Horn." It was a celebration based upon the sabbatical year of Deuteronomy 15. Every seventh sabbatical year (or once every forty-nine years), jubilee was to be announced – and thus in each fiftieth year, Israel was ordered to practice jubilee (Lev. 25:8-11).

The observance of jubilee required several things of the people of Israel. First, during the Year of Jubilee, the land was not to be cultivated but instead was to be allowed to lie fallow and thus restore itself. "You shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, 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" (Lev. 25:11-12). Second, at the jubilee all outstanding debts between Hebrews were to be cancelled, and no interest on a debt could be levied between jubilees (Lev. 25:25, 28, 37). Third, all Hebrew slaves and indentured servants were to be set free (Lev. 25:39-41).

These three stipulations were not peculiar to jubilee. They were also to be observed in the sabbatical year, which occurred every seven years. Since the jubilee was a "sabbatical year writ large", it stands to reason that it would contain within it the regulations of the sabbatical year.

But there is a fourth regulation, peculiar only to the Year of Jubilee. And it is the most important of them all. "In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants. In the jubilee, your land shall be released, and the property shall be returned to you" (Lev. 25:13, 23, 28). Wealth, during the time of the Jewish nation lay almost entirely in the land. And at jubilee each family was to regain its ancestral land.

At the time of the creation of the jubilee, the assumption was that each Israelite was a descendant of an Israelite who had entered the Promised Land under Joshua at the time of the conquest. As part of that conquest, each Israelite family and tribe had been assigned land. That was their "ancestral land", and no one could take it from them. They could choose to "sell" it for up to forty-nine years for compensation, but at the end of the forty-nine years or until the next jubilee (whichever occurred first), that land had to be returned free of charge to the Israelite family to whom Joshua had originally deeded it. It was their birthright.

Simply put, jubilee was a legislated reversal of fortune! It was Israel's most radical vehicle to redistribute its wealth so that society could be rebalanced and neither wealth nor political power could accumulate in the hands of a self-selected few. *That* was what Jesus was proclaiming to the Jewish people who hadn't practiced jubilee for over 400 years! Jesus had come proclaiming a radical reversal of his entire society.

After reading this scripture, Jesus would have given at least a brief sermon or exposition of it. That he did so was clearly indicated by Luke with the words, "He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down". The preacher of the day, having read the scripture, would have always returned the scroll to the attendant and then would have sat down to deliver the sermon.

We don't know how long Jesus' sermon was or what he said in it. But we do know its opening line. Jesus began the sermon with the words, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" In other words, Jesus proclaimed that with his coming, IT WAS JUBILEE TIME! Israel would never be the same again, because One had come who was going to restore economic equity, liberation of the poor, dynamic relationship with God and political justice back to the nation. It was Jubilee time! And there were those who heard Jesus gladly! And there were those who were so enraged that they tried to kill him. Guess which side those who had all the money and power were on?

The passage upon which Jesus' radical sermon was based tells us much more about jubilee than the passage Jesus read. Isaiah presents quite dramatically what would be the result of a nation that embraced the One who came proclaiming jubilee. He does this by a rather intriguing use of personal pronouns.

The prophet who was anointed by God to speak this oracle (that is, Isaiah) and the prophet who would come to proclaim and live out this prophecy (that is, Jesus), presents quite clearly both what he is going to do and what his actions will enable God's people to do. What the prophet or "actor" for God would do was: (1) "The spirit of the Lord God is upon *me*, (2) because the Lord has anointed *me*; (3) he has sent *me* to bring good news to the oppressed, (4) to bind up the brokenhearted, (5) to proclaim liberty to the captives, (6) and release to the prisoners; (7) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, (8) and the day of vengeance of our God; (9) to comfort all who mourn; (10) 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."

But then a very unusual thing happens in the Isaiac text. The pronouns suddenly change from "me" to "they" so that those who are the "they" (i.e., the poor and peasants) are given assignments and attitudes resulting from their jubilee liberation. Isaiah writes, (1) *they* will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory; (2) *They* shall build up the ancient ruins, (3) *they* shall raise up the former devastations; (4) *they* shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations." (61:1-4)

In other words, the prophet who is sent by God (in fact, even the Messiah) would come to the people both with the good news that jubilee was to be reinstated and practiced in Israel, but also to make it happen by his spiritual, political and economic intervention in the land. It would be the Man who would proclaim liberation and organize the people to deal with their spiritual and physical poverty and powerlessness. *But they would do it themselves!* It would be the people who would take charge of their situation, rebuild their walls, repair their ruined cities, and bloom where they were planted by God. The people would empower themselves. But they would never have empowered themselves, if there were not One to come to them and declare, "Let us rebuild!"

Why would God be willing to turn his nation upside-down? Why is it that God loves to raise up the lowly and bring down the powerful? Why is God and God's messenger – his prophet, his Messiah – always on the side of the oppressed? Isaiah tells us in no uncertain language:

“For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully give my people their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. 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 justice<sup>1</sup> and praise to spring up before all the nations” (Isaiah 61:8, 11).

**Psalm 126** is a communal psalm of thanksgiving that intriguingly examines the relationship between God’s intervention in human affairs and our responsibility for those affairs. This psalm is meant for use at a religious festival, and is divided into two parts. It begins:

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them”. The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced” (Psalm 126:1-3).

On a first reading, this psalm seems to be declaring that God has acted unilaterally to “restore the fortunes of Zion” and so the only appropriate response on the part of the children of Israel as well as other nations that have seen Israel’s growing prosperity is to declare, “The Lord (Yahweh) has done great things for us (them).” On the one hand, that is indeed a true statement. However, the Hebrew has a nuance in it that does not express itself in this translation that throws a different meaning on these two verses. The Hebrew expression, *‘im elleh*, would normally be translated “with them” rather than the NRSV translation, “for them”. That is, the common and preferred meaning of this Hebrew expression would ordinarily be “with them”; it is a rather awkward translation to make it “for them”.<sup>2</sup>

So what? Is this not quibbling over a few words? It is quibbling. But it is very important quibbling. If one adopts the more appropriate way of translating the Hebrew under question in verses 2 and 3, this is what would result:

“Then even the nations said: “Yahweh showed his greatness by working with them.” Yahweh did show his greatness by working with us; thus we grew happy”!<sup>3</sup> That is, the traditional translation of this passage, as captured in the NRSV, is that God has acted to do good to the Israelites. The translation that is less twisted is that God and Israel have worked together to bring about the transformation of what would otherwise be a barren wilderness. The Israelites have cooperated with God in the restoration of their country and the building up of their common wealth as a nation.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew word *tsedeq*, that is often translated “righteousness” in English translations of this verse is also the Hebrew word for “justice”. Whereas in English, “righteousness” means private or moral behavior, in Hebrew it has much more of a meaning of compensatory equality, public justice, clemency and compassion about it than does our English word. It is the arbitrary decision of the translator that determines whether *tsedeq* should be translated “justice” or “righteousness” in any given passage. But it is clear from the context of this passage that the author intended compensatory equality here and not being morally right or justifiable.

<sup>2</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: Psalms 100-150, The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 217-221.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, translation on p. 217.

In other words, this psalm is a reflection of Jubilee at work. If Israel is faithful to its Law, is conscientious about acting out the Sabbatical laws of letting the land lie fallow so that it can restore itself, forgiving the debts of the people and periodically freeing its slaves, and if the nation intentionally redistributes its wealth found in its land so that power cannot accrue or wealth accumulate in the hands of its wealthy powerful, then Israel is working with God for the continual restoration of the nation. Justice will prevail, wealth will be equitably shared, and a truly loving and relational culture will be built. And what will be the result of such cooperative behavior. The people will “grow happy”. And “Yahweh will exhibit his greatness” to both Israel and to all the nations around them!

It is in the light of this shared responsibility of both God and humanity that the Psalmist can sing, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy. Those who go out weeping bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves” (vss. 4-6).

Because of the Israelites responsible action toward their poor and powerless and because of their willingness to share their wealth and power by being obedient to the Jubilee, a miracle will take place among the people, the Psalmist proclaims. Having made the decision to be responsible in their treatment of one another and their shaping of their nation, the people will enter into this reforming process with “fear and trembling”. Will it work, or are they simply being fools with their money? So they will “sow in tears”, each “bearing his seed pouch” full of seeds, but doing so in fear and trepidation. But just wait and see what will happen! Trust God and do the responsible thing toward the neighbor, and just watch what will happen.

And so the Israelites discover what will happen when they live their national life, trusting in God in the very way they choose to use their money for the good of all in the community and act justly in their political decisions. They “will come home amid shouts of joy, bearing their full sheaves!” God will fully supply when God’s people fully share!

**John 1:6-8, 19-28** introduces the person and ministry of John the Baptist. But what is curious about the Gospel of John is that nowhere in it does John refer to this wilderness prophet as “John the Baptist”! That is because the primary emphasis that the gospel writer makes about this prophet is that he is a witness to Jesus Christ.

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, as the prophet Isaiah said.”

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thongs of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing” (John 1:6-9, 19-28).

The emphasis in the Gospel of John is not on the ministry of John the Baptist, nor the alternative community he created. It is solely upon him as being a witness to Jesus. He is a voice crying in the wilderness, “Recognize the coming of the Lord”. His entire responsibility is to lead others to faith.

This is magnificently demonstrated in verses 19 through 28. Immediately following the prologue to the book, the Gospel of John begins with “This is the testimony given by John.” He is immediately witnessing to Jesus.

The author sets the scene as one with protagonists. It tells us that “the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem” to check out John. The use of the word “Jews” in the Gospel of John is crucial, because we automatically think of it as a reference to those who were either believers in Yahweh or were ethnically Jewish. But that is not the case. The actual Greek word used by John was “Judaeos” (or, in English, “Judeans”), and was used exclusively of the Jerusalem Clerical Aristocracy – that is, those who politically and economically ruled Judea under the authority of Rome while hiding their complicity under the guise of their religious service to the Temple and the Law. Therefore, what the author is doing at the very beginning of the story is creating a protagonist relationship between Jesus and Israel’s (and later, Rome’s) political/economic/religious establishment.

“Priests and Levites” come to determine who is this strange figure in the desert. Does he believe he is the Messiah? If so, the establishment has the potential of a political rebellion on their hands. Does he believe he is Elijah? If he does, that is also grounds for alarm, because the people believed that Elijah would return to earth to announce the immediate coming of the Messiah. Is he “the prophet”, that is, one who is fomenting rebellion against Rome? To their relief, John declares he is none of these. But then what he says next chills them to the bone.

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’.” With this quotation from Isaiah 40:3, John confirms to them that he perceives himself as the herald of God’s actions to set his people free. He *is* the one who is announcing the immediate coming of the Messiah!

With this confrontation between the prophet John and the representatives of the political, economic and religious systems of Israel, the writer of the Gospel of John is presenting for the first time a dominant theme that will move throughout this book. A witness is not solely one who proclaims a truth or draws attention to a person. There is also a juridical dimension to a witness (think of our use of the word, “eye-witness” in a trial). In a very real way, John is on trial before the political, economic and religious powers of his day. That trial will continue throughout the entirety of the Gospel of John, with the “witness” shifting from John to Jesus and

the disciples around Jesus. The witness/trial motif of John reaches its climax in Jesus' trial before Pilate.

So in this Gospel, John is not "the Baptist" – creating his own cult. He is "John the Witness" who is always pointing the way to Jesus, always decreasing as Jesus increases, always not worthy to untie Jesus' sandals. John is therefore a profound example to us of our primary task in life – to be a witness to "the true light that enlightens everyone", even in the face of the most concentrated opposition of the principalities and powers of the world.

**I Thessalonians 5:16-24** concludes Paul's letter to the church in Thessalonica (except for some closing greetings), and basically calls these Christians to live lives open to the Spirit. But the portion of these concluding words that speaks to today's theme from the scriptures is this: "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything!" (5:19-21a)

This is the apostle's reminder to us that, like the prophet of Isaiah, like the Psalmist, like Jesus, like John the Baptist, like Paul himself, we are to live our lives open to the movement of the Spirit, and with that openness, receptive to speak the truth even when it threatens our lives. Whether we speak to parishioners, to the establishment or to the entire nation, we must be willing to be "a voice in the wilderness" who proclaims, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to work for release to prisoners, and to proclaim, It's Jubilee time!"

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