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Providence Presbyterian Church
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Isaiah 61

My father grew up on a farm just a few miles from Lake Ontario, north of Buffalo, NY. Fruits and Vegetables primarily, which they sold at market on Saturday mornings. I had fond memories of my grandparents' farm. For it was in those years before a child's labor is productive, when attempts to help are their own nuisance, that my parents sent us off each summer to spend a week on the farm. Like a scampering duckling, I followed grandpa out early and the thick dew soaked my sneakers before we reached the barn.

And my grandfather, like many who have built something and who took pride in their accomplishments, wanted someone to come behind him and pick up where he left off; a child or grandchild to take over the farm and keep it running, someone to live in the old farmhouse, someone to love the place as much as he did.

A couple of my cousins made goes of it. They lasted only a couple years each. My father scoffed at the idea of living in the house he grew up in. The house was heated mainly from the wood cook stove in the kitchen. The rest of the house was stone cold. You could see your breath from under the covers on a winter morning. The floor sagged and creaked. The pipes in the bathroom often froze as there was no real insulation in the floor of the house. The outhouse in the back was the back-up option.

The tractors were all old. The barns had boards missing and were mostly filled with items accumulated over the years. The dirt floor to the mechanic shop was so soaked with gas and oil, it was probably an EPA case waiting to happen.

So, while my grandfather was eager to offer the opportunity for his kids and grandkids to come back to the farm and build up the ancient ruins, no one was too keen on the opportunity. Or once someone saw the work that was truly involved, they shied away from the task.

So, when we think about those who had lived in exile in Babylon, a rather prosperous and developed city in the ancient world, now coming back to a dilapidated Jerusalem and the surrounding towns and villages, it makes me wonder just how exciting of an opportunity it may have seemed like. Certainly, God has a vision for what these descendants of Israel will do:

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.

It is a lovely vision. And while the bible employs metaphors routinely, this imagery is more literal, descriptive. It is a lovely vision, but that sounds like a lot of work. I mean, a lot of work. In the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we get more of the story of the return and the rebuilding of the temple and the city walls. They had their work cut out for them just in navigating the politics of rebuilding as well as motivating the people to think it was worth the effort, and the literal heaving of rocks back into place.

You see, we get this rosy image of the return, but all evidence suggests it was not easy. It was hard, hard to see the state of things, hard to know where to begin. And if an ancestor offers you such a plot of land to fix up, you have to decide whether it holds the same meaning for you, whether you have the heart and vision and desire to invest in rebuilding; whether you have the hope that it can be a place of joy and flourishing again.

That is the vision of Isaiah in the early verses of chapter 61. A vision of blessing and flourishing again, instead of the heaviness of judgment and devastation.

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;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ 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.

For the early listeners of Isaiah, the meaning of these words was clearly rooted in their recent history and current predicament. The release referred to was clear. The good news and the binding up and the restoration and the rebuilding all had a clear context, a clear vision of what God was doing and offering to the people. God was restoring the holy city, restoring the people as a beacon to the world.

The words of the prophets always had an original context in which they were spoken and by which they were deemed relevant and hopeful. But the words of the prophets were like a paradigm extending further into history, or like a disturbance in the water having multiple rings emanating forth, thus why so many of the prophet's words find further or fuller expression in Christ. We read Isaiah 61 with Christ in mind as the anointed one that the Lord's Spirit is upon, the messiah.

In our gospel reading, this connection is made by Jesus himself. We hear Jesus bring a new perspective, a new application, a new context to the Isaiah reading. In doing so, he implies these words are still alive, that they spoke again to what God was doing in a new time, a new context.

In our Luke reading, Jesus is the guest speaker in the synagogue. He reads from the scroll and then sits in the seat of Moses, basically their version of a pulpit.

He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "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,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ 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. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Meaning, God is doing this among us. It is likely that Jesus' Jewish listeners heard his words and were initially warmed by them because they still interpreted the Isaiah reading in that original context. That they were still waiting for the full restoration of the temple and the people and the land. They were still waiting for that first fulfillment to be finished, for Rome to be cast out, for Israel to be sovereign and free and uncontaminated by the world.

But, Jesus suggests that his listeners there in the synagogue are on the wrong track, that what the Lord is doing is something different, and that they are slow to perceive it. Jesus suggests this by highlighting examples from the old motif of the model foreigner or the model outsider. And he says that God will be working on the margins because the insiders, the Jewish people and leadership, will not

understand *how* he is fulfilling this vision from Isaiah and they will not respond nor be receptive. To which, they illustrate Jesus' point by trying to throw him off a ledge.

For when Jesus speaks of good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom of the oppressed, he does not seem to be imagining a release from foreign occupation, or the focus on physical structures or even nationalistic structures. The things that people need release from, in Jesus' view, are societal structures that marginalize, religious structures that keep people bound and ostracized and demonized. They need release from the forces that hold them boxed in, whether those be the spirits of depression, or demons that indwell, or ailments that limit, or a religious vision that always leaves them marginalized or oppressed, or pride, or arrogance.

Jesus renews the vision of Loving the Lord, and loving one's neighbor, and he targets the modes of oppression and subjugation that limit that possibility. And chief among the things, or perhaps the umbrella category, is human brokenness and sin and our tendency to perpetuate sinful patterns and cycles. For that is the release that Christ comes to bring—to break us free from the power of sin, from the sin that binds us. He comes to create a new redeemed community, a new people of faith that is not delineated by race or bodily condition, by cleanness or pedigree.

As we heard echoed in our call to worship, from the words of John's gospel, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." A new family of God not delineated by bloodline or nationality or even geography.

But like inheriting the family farm, or being brought home to land still in rubble from destruction that happened seven decades earlier, it is an opportunity that may be too daunting for many. It is an invitation that demands our work, calls forth our own desire, our own sense of vision for why such work and rebuilding and restoring and redeeming is necessary, and what benefit and vibrancy it might bring.

Yes, we can proclaim that Christ came into the world offering hope and peace and joy and love, but in what way has it been received and carried forward? That is the ultimate question for us. Yes, The spirit of the Lord GOD was upon Jesus because the LORD has anointed him to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners. But those whom Christ came to and who would benefit from Christ had to agree to

their need, to comply to Christ's work, to do their own work in making such release and sight and hope possible.

Christ offers forgiveness, but we all know how hard it is to receive forgiveness and to offer forgiveness. Christ offers a new start, but we all know how hard it is to truly let go of the past and receive a new start. Yes, Christ has come into the world making the new possible. But what is the state of your heart, your spirit, your hope, your healing? Because we have to do our own part, we have to put in the work on our own selves, our own emotions and motivations and reactions and so forth.

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.

Jesus turns these words as metaphor now, figurative speech – for we are the ruins, the world is the ruins, the effects of sin upon us and each other and our relationships and on the church and our communities; these are the former devastations and the ruined cities. It is inner restoration work. It is relational work. And like being offered an old run-down family farm, the scope of the work may be daunting. We may choose to put curtains in the windows rather than deal with the mess, or paint the front door rather than deal with the rotting foundation. Because the gift which Jesus offers us, which he brings into the world, requires all of our substance if we are going to realize that redemptive work, to be healed and whole, forgiven, and truly free.

And if you are going to rebuild an old farm, or a burned city, or a sin-scarred heart, it is going to take work, envisioning a healed and a rebuilt house. Do you have the vision for it? Can you stick to it until Christ's vision, until Christ's work is done in and among us?

By the time my grandfather passed away, the farm was in pretty bad shape. The contents of the barns were carried off and the structures leveled, and the property sold as building lots. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the returning exiles, they rebuilt the ancient ruins; long and hard work. And the followers of Jesus, who follow Jesus's example and teaching of social and personal restoration, many follow, but many also turn away because it was too hard. And the same question comes to us, while we celebrate the hope come into the world through Christ's birth. Because, making the vision come forth in our lives takes all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

It is hard work, but as Isaiah envisioned, there is a joy to be had, a renewed vibrancy that is to be found in this restorative and redemptive journey. I am reminded of the words of the psalmist who portrays the returning exiles, who captures a response that does not highlight the burden or the work, but instead emphasizes the joy and possibility and embracing God's mercy. Because it is the benefit that often motivates us to do the work.

Psalm 126

A Harvest of Joy

A Song of Ascents.

- 1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
- 2 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.”
- 3 The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.
- 4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.
- 5 May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.
- 6 Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

These words are fulfilled in our hearing, if we are willing to receive them, to take the invitation to that inner renewal, to that hopeful rebuilding.

And all God's people said...

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

The Good News of Deliverance

- 61** 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;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 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.
4 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.
- 8 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.
9 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.
10 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.
11 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: 16-30

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

(Mt 13:54–58; Mk 6:1–6)

¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ 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. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³ He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’ ” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” ²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.