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St. John's Episcopal Church
ADVENT III

COMFORT AND JUSTICE

Today's magnificent passage from "Third Isaiah", is an alchemical burst of poetry, mysticism and prophecy. "The Spirit of the Lord God, the Spirit of Yahweh, is upon me, anointing me" to bring good news to the emerging people of Israel. God anoints a human agent to speak on God's behalf and act upon God's will. The prophetic word is as good as deed. *Dabar*. Truth is easier to bear when expressed in beautiful language.

The inaugural words of this poet/prophet are reminiscent of the commissioning and inauguration of the great King David 500 years earlier. This newly anointed one has been called to deliver wisdom, truth and hope to the downhearted people of Israel. Whether real or metaphorical, the human agent of God's stirred up power has immense theological authority. His visionary words have a social, economic and moral gravitas in the manner of Martin Luther King's famous, "I have a dream".

So, for what purpose has God's agent come? Listen to the litany of infinitives, the verbs denoting strong actions.

"To bring good news to the oppressed,
To bind up the broken hearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And release to the prisoners,
And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn."

Yeah God! Except perhaps for "the day of vengeance of our

God." More on that later...

The anointed prophet expresses God's passionate desire for restoration, justice, and the economic and moral reordering of society... a God whose will it is to "make all things new" (Revelation 21), not just individuals but, more importantly, nations. Like an inner tuning fork, the prophet's articulation of a profound moral revelation rings true.

In this passage, the transformative power of Yahweh is evoked like the Ruach, the Spirit of God, "In the beginning", in Genesis 1 bringing order to chaos and creation out of emptiness. Where there is emptiness in our lives there is also hope for a new beginning and restoration.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus begins his mission at a synagogue in Nazareth by quoting today's passage of sacred writing from Isaiah. I believe we should hear and interpret the Isaiah passage 500 years before Jesus *not* as a literal preview of the Christian Messiah so much as a sign of God's underlying, consistent passion for healing and justice.

Jesus' choice of texts that day would prove explosive and lead to the people driving him out of town. Why? Because Isaiah's message is blunt in its call for economic justice and power sharing. When Jesus quotes Isaiah with its cries for justice, a new moral order and the re-distribution of wealth, the "have-nots" love him and the "haves" forcefully eject him from Nazareth.

After the infinitives come the "insteads".

"To provide 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."

Yeah God! This is good news! (Sursum Corda)

“Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.”

Where are you oppressed in your life? Where is your heart broken? In what way are your comforts a burden? We are all captive to something, sometimes the things we like. We all mourn. Isaiah’s words may speak to individuals like us as well as to whole communities or nations. According to the prophet, God’s will is to rebuild the ruins that dwell in our innermost hearts as well as in our cities, that mourning might turn to gladness. The antidote for fatigue and despair is wholeheartedness. “Lift up your hearts.”

As a nation that is currently divided, anxious and frequently aggressive, we might thrill to hear Isaiah’s words reassurances of comfort, restoration and repair, rejection of “wrong-doing and robbery” (corruption).

But beyond the solace there is also a muscular message of economic reform that could be unsettling. The lines that proclaim the “*day of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God*” sound ominous. Scholars believe that most likely they refer to the “Year of Jubilee” as described in Leviticus 25. Part of the Mosaic code, the Year of Jubilee, was supposed to be observed every 50 years. During this year, all financial debts were to be canceled and all property bought or taken from others during the previous 50 years was to be restored to the original owners. The intelligence behind this passage is remarkable because it shows what we know so well in the contemporary world as well as in history ... that the normal direction of civilization is for a small percentage of the people to amass vast power and resources while a much larger portion grows poorer. This proclivity is not new.

The Jubilee Year was intended as an automatic moral and economic corrective. As does Jesus, the ancient Jewish God seems to understand that compassion means more than the physical or spiritual healing of individuals, and that justice means not revenge

but the redress of unequal distribution of money and power. The rich and powerful might experience the Jubilee year as a “day of vengeance” because they have much to lose.

Now we see why Jesus was driven out of Nazareth and why in today’s gospel the temple authorities in Jerusalem want to know all about John the Baptist and then later about Jesus himself. They are afraid of losing what they have. Aren’t we all? To the people of Israel returning to their homeland after decades in exile, to this people whose property, whose homes and money had been robbed by an invading army, to this beleaguered people, the message of the redress of wrongs must have brought great joy and hope. They would get back their land and their homes.

Today, there are many refugee communities around the world, including, about 4 million Palestinian Arabs, who long for their homes, whose deepest yearning is for the reconnection with their land. This is true also for millions of Somalis and Iraqis and the displaced of many other countries. Land, tribe, memory and identity are all connected. When these ties are severed by war, famine or natural disaster, there is great pain and suffering.

Was the Year of Jubilee ever actually observed with its requirements implemented? Probably not, I would venture. I can imagine a kind of Monty Python-esque scene when those in charge are questioning amongst themselves, “Let’s see, is this the 49th year, right? Or maybe it’s the 51st; darn, we missed the Jubilee!”

Today’s lesson from Isaiah is timely now and always. Especially in this sacred season as we approach the birth of one who will carry the “hopes and dreams of all the world”, who brings compassion and deep healing to the hurting, wounded and the despondent, and who also brings a passion for justice and an audacity to name and confront oppression.

Where is the intersection of healing and justice in our lives? In what ways does the comfort and strength we are offered lead us to express love for the disenfranchised? The road to personal

enlightenment is also the way to compassion for the world. Learning to bear one's cross without aggression towards others leads to deep empathy. In writing about Isaiah's poem, Walter Brueggeman speaks of "the cruciality of a human agent who will undertake and enact the intention of Yahweh." How might we be human agents of God's passion for healing and justice?

Recently, a parishioner visited a church in Toronto and witnessed a remarkable conjunction of healing and justice. This church has a powerful ministry to the homeless. It bridges a wide gap and focuses on shared humanity. In addition to providing hot meals to street people, volunteers also attend to some of the deeper needs to be loved and cared for. When is a haircut just a haircut? At this church, our friend described to me how someone gives haircuts to those who cannot afford a barber.

What's more, she witnessed three volunteers giving pedicures to the guests there. The lay ministers bathe the feet, cut the nails, rasp the dead tissue away and massage the feet of their guests. Jesus, taking the form of a servant, set this example of tender love before his dumbfounded disciples and told them and us to do likewise. The above description of foot care might make one feel squeamish, but just think about the love that is communicated and the dignity conferred upon these folks whom have no money, no home or family to go to and who are generally ignored. Healing and a little justice. New feet, renewed souls.

The guests leave touched by those who emulate the one who was "born with healing in his wings". These homeless people are for a few moments at home. They leave strong as "oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory."

Isaiah 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; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day

of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to 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.

⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁵Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; ⁶but you shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. ⁷Because their shame was double, and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. ⁸For 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. ⁹Their 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.

¹⁰I 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. ¹¹For 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.