

## Jubilee

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

Isaiah speaks words that I really like: *the year of the Lord's favor*. Especially after the year we have had, a year of favor would be refreshing, don't you think? Did you know that the year of the Lord's favor was first introduced hundreds of years before Isaiah ever spoke those words? We have to go all the way back to the Book of Leviticus to find the origin of this concept. God gives these instructions in Leviticus 25 on how the Jubilee, or year of the Lord's favor, should be observed.

#### Leviticus 25:8-55 (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup> You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years.

<sup>9</sup> Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud; on the tenth day of the seventh month—on the day of atonement—you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land.

<sup>10</sup> And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim *liberty* throughout the land to *all its inhabitants*. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family.

<sup>11</sup> That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines.

<sup>12</sup> For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

<sup>13</sup> In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property...

<sup>25</sup> If anyone of your kin falls into difficulty and sells a piece of property, then the next of kin shall come and redeem what the relative has sold...

<sup>28</sup> But if there are not sufficient means to recover it, what was sold shall remain with the purchaser until the year of jubilee; in the jubilee it shall be released, and the property shall be returned...

<sup>35</sup> If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them; they shall live with you as though resident aliens.

<sup>38</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.

<sup>39</sup> If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves.

<sup>40</sup> They shall remain with you as hired or bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee.

<sup>41</sup> Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property.

<sup>42</sup> For they are *my* servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold.

<sup>43</sup> You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God.

<sup>44</sup> As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves...

These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness.

<sup>47</sup> If resident aliens among you prosper, and if any of your kin fall into difficulty with one of them and sell themselves to an alien, or to a branch of the alien's family,

<sup>48</sup> after they have sold themselves they shall have the right of redemption; one of their brothers may redeem them,

<sup>49</sup> or their uncle or their uncle's son may redeem them, or anyone of their family who is of their own flesh may redeem them; or if they prosper they may redeem themselves...

<sup>53</sup> As a laborer hired by the year they shall be under the alien's authority, who shall not, however, rule with harshness over them in your sight.

<sup>54</sup> And if they have not been redeemed in any of these ways, they and their children with them shall go free in the jubilee year.

<sup>55</sup> For to me the people of Israel are servants; they are my servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Of course, the idea of slavery is no longer considered acceptable, thankfully, but even in Biblical times, those who served as slaves were to be treated with care and compassion. Jubilee was to be a time of release and restoration.

Jubilee is only mentioned once outside of the Book of Leviticus. In the Book of Numbers, chapter 36, verse 4 Jubilee is mentioned, where it says:

**Numbers 36:4 (NRSV)**

<sup>4</sup> And when the jubilee of the Israelites comes, ..."

Jubilee was yet to come since the Israelites would only spend 40 years in the desert (if you can think of 40 years as ONLY). Jubilee was to be practiced when they settled in their new land. A land given to them by God. Sadly, there is no record in the Biblical texts to indicate the God's people practiced Jubilee at any time in their history as they had been commanded. Perhaps that played into their being carried into exile in later days. From the time of Moses to Isaiah, the people were still waiting for the year of the Lord's favor to come to fruition.

I'd like to share a story with you about a time jubilee *was* practiced. You have heard me speak about how my husband and I adopted our two youngest children, Kenny and Lisai, when they were in their early elementary years. They had been in foster care for 8 years and lived in almost as many different homes during that time. Because of the chaos of their early years, they both had significant negative behavioral issues. To be honest we struggled with how to address the many ways these children found to challenge us, our rules, and our authority in their lives. One response to misbehaviors, and one we practiced with our other children as well, was the removal of a favorite toy or

gadget. The item that was removed would be returned when the behavior had been corrected. Unfortunately, with these children, behaviors rarely, if ever, were corrected. We all just ended up moving on to the next problem behavior. As you might imagine, this meant that we were gaining quite a collection of the kids' "stuff". It got to the point where *we* had all the goodies and there was nothing left to use as leverage.

Attempting to restore some equilibrium to our home situation, we announced to the kids that we were going to practice Jubilee. This was not a word they were familiar with and so we explained that in the Bible, jubilee was a time when things that had been taken away were returned for no other reason than it was time for them to be given back. They thought this sounded like a good deal. Their behaviors had not changed, they still challenged us daily, but they learned that mom and dad would not withhold from them forever. It didn't mean they were off the hook for their behaviors, it simply meant that belongings were back where they should have been all along, as if nothing negative had ever happened. For a very short time, we were the cool parents! We had shown favor to our children, even though they hadn't necessarily earned it. Jubilee, as decreed by God, was not meant to be about "earning" anything. Jubilee was meant to bring glory to God, restoring Creation and his people to their original order.

I came across a bit of information that I found quite interesting in one particular commentary that explained that a Biblical reference to a “year” means an acceptable time of grace, while a similar reference to a “day” heralds a time of vengeance. This stood out to me because one of my very first sermons came from verses in the Book of Amos that spoke of the Day of the Lord, which I learned was not a time to look forward to as attested to by these words from Amos:

**Amos 5:18-20 (NIV2011)**

<sup>18</sup> Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light.

<sup>19</sup> It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him.

<sup>20</sup> Will not the day of the LORD be darkness, not light— pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness?

So, a year of favor is something we can get excited about. Who wouldn't be excited to take part in Jubilee? I think the original hearers of Isaiah's words would have jumped for joy knowing they would be the recipients of Jubilee.

Isaiah was speaking to a people who had been living in exile for many years. Why were they in exile? They had not followed God's commands. They had followed after false idols, their leaders had made poor decisions that cost the

nation dearly, and now the entire nation was paying a very heavy price. The people were definitely living in dark times – dark for their behaviors that led to their exile and dark for the oppression they were living under.

Yet into this doom and gloom scenario, the prophet Isaiah comes speaking words that can only be seen as comforting.

**Isaiah 9:2 (NIV2011)**

<sup>2</sup> The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

These words of promise will carry God's people through very dark times to come.

One of the things I have learned about prophecy is that the prophet speaks to the now and the not yet. We often speak of God's kingdom in that way. God's kingdom is here now, but not yet. Not totally present until Jesus returns. So, we are not surprised that hundreds of years after Isaiah, Jesus speaks these same words as he begins **His** ministry. These words that gave comfort to their ancestors would also bring hope to people living under the oppression of Roman rule.

Both Isaiah and Jesus bring hope to the people of their times. The poor, always oppressed, are delivered good news that God has not forgotten them.

Those who mourn will now experience joy because of the things that God has done for them. Those who have been captive in exile, through persecution, or by their own sin will now experience a freedom not known before. All because God has chosen to show favor on His people, despite their failures. God's favor is shown through their restoration.

**Isaiah 61:4 (NIV2011)**

<sup>4</sup> They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

For the exiles coming out of Babylon the opportunity to restore Jerusalem and the Temple to their former glory was a great gift from God. They had longed for return for 70 years. They had planned all that time to rebuild their city and the House of their God. God's promise would come true for the exiles.

In the time of Jesus, His birth heralded the return of the Davidic kingdom. The exiles in Babylon waited 70 years for restoration of their city. The people of God had waited 700 years for the return of the line of David, for the root of Jesse, the Messiah to arrive.

Having believed in the promise of God, the people were restored. And now restored the people were blessed by God with a new covenant. This new covenant was reminiscent of the one made with Abraham so long ago. God's



people will be made known among all nations and everyone who sees them will know that they are blessed by God.

The promise first held out by Isaiah for the people of antiquity, then refreshed by the ministry of Jesus in Judea, is a promise held out for us today. The Lord wishes for good news to be declared to the poor, to have the brokenhearted bound up in love, to release those held in darkness whether that be from physical, mental, or emotional prisons, or other prisons of their own making. This will be the year of the Lord's favor, when God's people follow the teaching of His Son, and the power of the Holy is unleashed in the world.

I know for myself that the current news cycle brings anything but the feeling of the Lord's favor in our world. This cycle of a historic hurricane season, volcanoes erupting, massive wildfires, political unrest around the world, not to mention the socio-economic residual impact of a global pandemic, can leave us feeling that there is no hope, that the Lord has abandoned us. But we are not to despair. Jesus has come and declared quite clearly the year of the Lord's favor in our hearing.

When we practice God's gift of Jubilee, we will see the fruits of the year of the Lord's favor. When people are no longer hungry, cold, and ostracized; when there is parity in the economy; when people no longer live in fear, the year of the Lord's favor will be realized. When we practice the gift of Jubilee,

then God's renewal can take place. We are not returning to ancestral towns and villages like the listeners in Isaiah's day, but our modern towns and villages can be renewed when we live out Isaiah's prophecy to proclaim the good news, and bind up the brokenhearted, and thereby setting captives free. When living wages are paid to workers so they can support their families. When businesses invest in their communities, not just shareholders pockets, renewal will come. When each of us finds a way to use our time and talents to benefit not only ourselves, but those around us, just think of what kind of renewal could happen here in our own little corner of the world. Then think of what happens as more people do the same, how renewal can spread across our state and our nation. With God's help, even around the world. And all the world will rejoice in the year of the Lord's favor.

What is our response to God's great promise of renewal and restoration, to the gift of the year of His favor? We are to give praise much as Isaiah does in these verses today. We are to delight and rejoice in the Lord God. This certainly beats bemoaning the state of the world today. We are to cloth ourselves in gladness as a wedding guest and throw off our mourning clothes. Others will be drawn to us and the message we carry when we give off the light of Christ, as opposed to reflecting the doom and gloom of the world around us. Let us be the sprout that others see growing up from the soil, the new thing that the Lord is doing in this the year of His favor. Let us together as Christians stand before the world and show the light and love of God, sent

down to us at Christmas time in the birth of a baby boy born in a humble stable yet destined to be the King of Kings.

AMEN

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