

## Sermon Notes

**Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11**Pat Cameron; December 11, 2011

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Every Advent, Geneva and I and a few friends read the story of “The Other Wise Man.” The other wise man is supposed to meet up with the other three at an appointed time and place, but gets delayed because he stops to help someone in need. So he travels alone, spending the rest of his life searching for Jesus and helping people along the way. Even though we’ve heard the story year after year, we still wonder: will the other wise man ever find Jesus?

This morning’s reading from Isaiah 61 is a familiar text. Since this congregation follows the lectionary during the Advent season, it cycles around at least every 3 years. And every time we study Luke Chapter 4, we hear it again through the words of Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

Many scholars believe that the book of Isaiah represents the words of three different prophets or schools of prophets, all of them identifying with the original Isaiah. The main reason for this conclusion is the shifting voice and tone of the prophets’ words in different sections of the book which suggest different contexts to which the prophets are speaking.

The first section is chapters 1 through 39. According to Chapter 6, the original Isaiah received his call in the year that King Uzziah of Judah died, which would have in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C., around 739 or 740 B.C. Seeing God’s judgment of Judah in the geopolitics of his day, Isaiah speaks harsh words of warning to Judah’s kings and priests—change your ways, or else! But Isaiah’s words are not heeded. By the by the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the Babylonians sack Jerusalem, destroy the Temple, and exile Judah’s leaders to live in Babylon.

In Chapters 40 through Ch. 55, Isaiah’s voice takes on a different tone. Now the prophet identifies with the suffering of the people held captive by the Babylonians in Babylon. This section is where the image of the “suffering servant” appears, another text often read during Advent. Written near the end of the Exile, this section of the book is full of hopeful anticipation that the captives would soon be free. (Duncan, Stan G., Jubilee Justice Blog; <http://jubileejusticetaskforce.blogspot.com>)

Then, in chapters 56-66, the voice changes again, this time to one of encouragement to people in difficult circumstances. Most scholars assume that by the time these prophecies were uttered, Cyrus the Persian had conquered the Babylonian empire and had issued his decree of 539 B.C. in which he released the captives to return to the land from which they had come. This section of Isaiah, then, has the prophet speaking as one of those who have returned to Judea.

Archeologists have concluded that the average lifespan during Isaiah's time would have been about 40. The book of Isaiah spans 200 years, from around 740 to at least 539 B.C. Even considering the stories of patriarchs and matriarchs living into their hundreds, for one prophet to live 200 years is over the top.

So, given these assumptions, our text this morning comes from what is commonly known as "Third Isaiah," chapters 56-66. The captives have been although not all of them have chosen to go back to Judea. The original captives taken into exile have died, so it is their children and grandchildren who Cyrus freed. Just as second and third-generation immigrants commonly identify more with the land on which they were born than the land their parents and grandparents came from, there were many Jews who stayed behind. But Isaiah is in Judea, with those who have returned.

To whom were the prophet's words addressed? When the exiles returned to Judea, they had discovered that their image of what life would be like in their homeland was far different from reality. The Exile lasted about 50 years; and the Jews who had never left Judea had not yet rebuilt Jerusalem with inadequate resources, their leadership in exile, and living under the watchful eye of their Babylonian oppressor, Jerusalem still lay in ruins, as it had for the past five decades. Isaiah 61 provides words of comfort for returning Jews who had expected things would be better than when their ancestors had left.

Though the Palestinian Jews and the returnees were kindred in religious heritage, they were in most ways, culturally different. They had grown up in a foreign land and had acquired a foreign language (Aramaic). The Palestinian Jews were less than welcoming to these foreigners. The returnees were aliens, strangers, in their own land.

Therefore, according to this common interpretation, the returning exiles are those who Isaiah identifies as oppressed and brokenhearted. They are captives and prisoners of the Jews who not gone through the Exile. They are the ones to whom the prophet addresses God's promises "to comfort all who mourn...to give a garland instead of ashes...the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit." This is the common interpretation of Isaiah 61.

But according to Stan G. Duncan, chair of the United Church of Christ's Jubilee Justice Network, there is another interpretation of to whom the prophet's words are addressed. He claims that some of the wealthy returnees to Palestine were oppressing other, poorer Jews returning to Judah, as well as poor Jews who had never left. Duncan says, "They used their economic and class power to influence the application of tax and finance laws ... to their advantage, causing huge increases in their own incomes, but also tremendous poverty in others" (ibid). Duncan claims that during times of drought, the wealthy would loan agricultural start-up loans at high rates; and if the loans weren't paid back in a year, they would be rolled over into a second loan with even higher interest rates. Finally, Duncan says, the peasant farmers, unable to pay off their debt, often had to give up their land and became servants of the wealthy (ibid).

Nehemiah 5:1-5 seems to back up this interpretation:

Now, there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were many who said, "With our sons and our daughters, we are many, we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive." There were also those who said, "We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine"....Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others."

Are we accept this interpretation, then the "oppressors" of which third Isaiah speaks, are the wealthy to whom the poor are prisoners. "Oppressor" can be translated as "poor," but it also has political overtones. To these oppressed, to the poor, Isaiah proclaims the "Year of the Lord," a reference to the Jubilee law, described in the book of Leviticus. In order to rectify the gap between the rich and the poor, this law said that every 50 years, slaves were to be freed and the land was to be returned to its original owner.

In this Year of the Lord, God will provide for the poor garlands instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of faint spirits. They will become strong oak trees of righteousness. *They* are the ones who will restore the ruined cities. *Their* descendants will be known throughout the world as people whom God has blessed. Adorned with garments of salvation, wearing a robe of righteousness, and dressed as for a wedding celebration, Isaiah proclaims that, "...as the earth bring forth its shoots and a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations." The people won't have to wait another 50 years for the Jubilee Year. The time for the Jubilee law is not!

If this interpretation is correct, it's no wonder that Jesus gets into trouble when he reads from the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue in his home town, Nazareth.. Luke records that Jesus read verse 1 and part of v. 2 of Isaiah 61; whether he read just the verses recorded in Luke, or a longer passage from Isaiah, we don't know for sure.

In Luke, the NRSV changes "good news to the oppressed" to "good news to the poor." But no matter whether translated "oppressed" or "poor," the reference has both economic and political connotations. Luke also adds to Jesus' reading of Isaiah 61, the restoring of sight to the blind. The conclusion what Jesus read, according to Luke, was to proclaim the Year of the Lord's favor—the Year of the Lord. It was time to put the Jubilee law into practice.

After he finishes reading, Jesus announces that he has come to fulfill these words from the prophet. Those gathered at the synagogue doubt that the son of a common laborer is worthy of such a claim. Noting that prophets are recognized everywhere but among their own people, Jesus gives the congregation a history lesson, reminding them of incidents when Israel rejected its prophets, while foreigners—Israel's enemies-- responded in faith.

Who are the oppressors of the poor? Who are the blind? Who are those who will lose in the time of Jubilee? Those gathered in the synagogue didn't miss the point of Isaiah's words. For daring to speak the truth, Jesus barely escapes the angry men's attempt to push him over the edge of a cliff.

The reaction of those gathered at the synagogue would have been not nearly so severe if Jesus had read a different text. That's why Luke has Jesus read from Isaiah 61. The words of the prophet were made to order for creating an adversarial reaction between Jesus and the synagogue. The congregation tried to kill him by forcing him to jump off a cliff before he had a chance to put these words from Isaiah 61 into practice.

I've been pondering these words from Isaiah that Jesus used to inaugurate his ministry, and they really bother me, particularly in this season of Advent. I want to welcome an innocent baby. But now, I get images of Jesus, already dreaming in his manger about how to introduce an upside kingdom in which the poor receive good news, the brokenhearted are comforted, and the captives are set free.

But what really bothers me is that a gospel-writer had the audacity to put Isaiah's words on the lips of Jesus. If Luke hadn't had Jesus read them as his inaugural speech, I could have more easily ignored them.

But I can't get around these words. I have to face an uncomfortable question: As a middle-class, white American—a white *male* American, to boot—am I supporting a lifestyle and a system that oppresses, depresses, and holds poor people captive? Is it in my interest to prevent the implementation of the Jubilee law?

One of the most inspiring movements that takes Jesus' words seriously is the Jubilee USA Network. "Jubilee USA is an alliance of more than 75 religious denominations and faith communities, human rights, environmental, labor, and community groups working for the definitive cancellation of crushing debts to fight poverty and injustice in Asia, Africa, and Latin America ("Who We Are," Jubilee USA website [www.jubileeusa.org](http://www.jubileeusa.org))

Like the peasant farmers to whom Nehemiah refers, who had to become slaves to work off their debt, whole nations are burdened by servicing debts they've acquired through international agencies, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, who in turn are funded by loans from large banks. Because these nations acquired these debts in a time when interest rates were high, paying off these debts puts an insurmountable burden upon debtor nations. These international agencies have tried to ensure that the debts are paid by imposing "Structural Adjustment" requirements on debtor nations, which puts limitations on their ability to pay for needed social services to help their impoverished citizens. As the former President of Tanzania, Joseph Nyerere, puts it, "These countries are paying debt service to wealthy nations and institutions at the expense of providing these basic services to their citizens." (Nyerere, Joseph, "Why Drop the Debt?," (Jubilee USA website, [www.jubileeusa.org](http://www.jubileeusa.org))

To address this problem, Jubilee USA calls for “Definitive debt cancellation of the international debt owed by countries burdened with high levels of human need and environmental distress which are unable to meet the basic needs of their people or achieve a level of sustainable development that ensures a decent quality of life.”

Jubilee USA is also upfront about the biblical basis that undergirds their work. “In the Jubilee Year as quoted in Leviticus, those enslaved because of debts are freed, lands lost because of debt are returned, and community torn by inequality is restored...Today international debt has become a new form of slavery...The Jubilee USA Network brings together people to turn this reality around...” (“A Biblical Basis,” Jubilee USA website [www.jubileeusa.org](http://www.jubileeusa.org))

Isaiah 61 envisions a world in which people don’t own other people. Luke’s Jesus picks up this theme and makes it the main platform of his campaign to bring good news to the poor. Through biblically-based groups such as Jubilee USA, people like us who are unwitting cogs in the wheels of injustice can be advocates for poor people and poor nations by working toward a modern-day embodiment of the Jubilee Year.

So let us prepare to welcome the Christ Child. I’ve heard that we can find him in a stable, lying in a manger, which I think is a euphemism for a cattle trough. Let’s enjoy Jesus as a baby while we can. But as we celebrate his birth, let’s do so with our eyes wide open. Before you know it, baby Jesus will outgrow that kid stuff and will ask us to follow him. The question is not that of the other wise man—whether or not we will find Jesus, for this is the Advent promise. The real question is, when we find Jesus, are we willing to go where he leads us?