

## **“The God who Comes to Set Us All Free”**

**Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126**

**A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells**

Tradition informs us each candle on the Advent wreath stands for something: In order they are: hope, love, joy, peace, and the Christ candle in the center. In this third week of Advent, we come to the Sunday of joy. The candle for this Sunday is distinguished from the others with its rose color. The Sunday itself is called Gaudete Sunday, in some countries, which comes from Latin and means “rejoice ye.”

Why rejoice? Why should we be joyful? Joy is called for because of what God is doing in the world. God is coming to set us free. Not just one of us, not just a few of us, not one club or group or state or nation or ethnic identity—God is coming to set us all, every person, free.

Now I know there’s got to be a curmudgeon or two out there who’s just dying to ask, “Okay, preacher, God’s coming to set us free. Free from what?”

- Free from whatever it is that is keeping us back.
- Free from whatever it is that is holding us down.
- Free to be who God made us to be—a beloved people made in God’s image.

God is coming to give us more than we can imagine—the gift of divine love that transforms...well, everything. Now THAT is something to be joyful about...or at least it should be.

On this Sunday of joy, I cannot think of two better readings from the Bible that describe for us what is, and what will be, the impact of the Lord’s coming. The good news is spoken by one who has been anointed by God to bring hope and joy to the people who were oppressed. God is coming:

...to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn...(Isaiah 61:1-2).

When these words were originally spoken, they were aimed at people who suffered in extreme poverty.

- Some had barely enough to support their families—they were hungry, wretched, destitute.
- Some were forced to sell themselves into servitude so they could work off their debts; and, too often, that debt-bondage lasted a lifetime.
- They were held captive, broken-hearted, and without hope.

But God proclaimed “the year of the Lord’s favor”—Jubilee! A time described in the Book of Deuteronomy to release from bondage, to bind up old wounds, to set the captives free.

Do you remember as children when we played the game “Tag?” There are different versions of this game. In one of them, the children who are tagged are taken prisoner and have to sit out the game near their opponent’s base. But if someone on their team runs by and touches them, they are set free from the prison.

What if all the prisoners were set free? That’s what Jubilee is all about.

- What if everyone who was unjustly imprisoned received justice and was set free?
- What if debts were forgiven? (Jesus himself prayed for forgiveness of crushing debts in the prayer we know as the Lord’s Prayer—“forgive us our debts as we forgive those indebted to us.” Think about this today: Mortgages, car loans, student loans...what if all were forgiven and no one was beholden to another?
- What if everyone who is held captive by sin, bad habits, low self-esteem, physical impairment, mental illness, addiction, spiritual malaise...what if all the people were set free to be who God intends us to be?

That’s the kind of Jubilee Isaiah proclaims. And it’s the kind of Jubilee Jesus proclaimed as well.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus himself announced the start of his ministry with the words of the first two verses of Isaiah ending with “...to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (See Luke 4:18-19). This is a world transformed, and Isaiah provides us the word-picture of God’s new world:

“They [that is, the people who receive God’s comfort into their hearts] will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.

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” (Isaiah 61:3-4).

God transforms lives by freeing us from what holds us down, and then, God raises us up and empowers us to be part of the transformation of God's world.

- We become builders, raisers, repairers of what has been destroyed by sinfulness, greed, jealousy, and the drive to power.
- We become lovers and doers of justice—no more will a woman or a man receive an unjust ruling, no more will communities of people be condemned because of who they are, no longer with the oppressors oppress and take advantage of the vulnerable
- ...all will be free to realize the God-given image in themselves because God is coming and God is changing the world.

“The years of the Lord’s favor,” wrote retired United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon, is “the year in which God gets what God wants, when earth more closely resembles that which God first had in mind when God began forming nothing into something, less into more.”<sup>1</sup>

God is coming to give us more. And it begins with an infant’s cry in a manger, in a village, in an impoverished land on the fringes of an empire, long, long ago.

If we can hear Isaiah aright this day, God is coming to bring justice and righteousness to all the corners of the earth...and the first corner God begins with is the human heart. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light,” wrote Isaiah, “those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined” (Isaiah 9:2). Here, in Isaiah 61, Isaiah proclaims: “The people who lived in chains have been freed!”

And the world is not the same. It cannot be the same with the liberating, justice-bringing, comfort-giving, life-transforming God on the loose. This is why we rejoice on this Third Sunday of Advent—for we see the light of the manger shining in the distance, growing brighter as we approach it, and giving us sight to see the glory of the coming of the Lord. And He comes...into our hearts...giving us new hearts with which to love the Lord and to love others and to live in beloved community.

Psalm 126 best expresses the joy God’s people experience when God comes to redeem:

“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).

What’s it like when a dream comes true? What happens to you when you are surprised with the very thing you so deeply desired? “...then it was said among the nations, “The Lord has done great things for them.”

Sometimes, as in this psalm, it takes someone else to point it out to you, to say, “You really have been blessed in this.” And then we realize it, and the light dawns, and the smile creeps across the face, and we affirm God’s goodness to us...and we rejoice! “Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). God’s new world is breaking into the old world.

You know, it might be more accurate to say God’s coming is breaking the old world apart, making way for a new world governed by hope not despair, by faith not fear, and by love not hate. God is breaking into this old world, and the old world, ourselves included, cannot be the same.

Around this time of year, train stations in Italy set out nativity scenes depicting the birth of Christ. The usual cast of characters are all there: The baby Jesus is there, lying in the manger, the focal point of the scene and center of everyone’s attention; Mary and Joseph are quietly watching over their newborn child; the shepherds are present, to see this thing the angels proclaimed to them; and, there are the wisemen bearing their gifts. But look carefully at this scene and something is amiss. What surrounds the nativity is not



<sup>1</sup> Will Willimon, *Will Willimon’s Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part 1*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 24.

the pastoral countryside of Bethlehem, but ruins, broken buildings of the Roman Empire. The old world is dying as God's new world is being built on the ruins of empire.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is coming, to be born again into hearts that are ready to receive Him, ready to be restored, ready to be renewed by the love of God that seeks to make its home in us. Those hearts in need are our hearts: sickened by sin, weakened by the frustrations of this world, worn down by the relentless drumbeat of bad news, our hearts need a rebirth of hope this year. Our hearts need a rebirth of Jesus.

For everyone listening to this word today, everyone who feels vulnerable or oppressed, discouraged or defeated, stressed out and at your wits end...take heart. God is coming to set us free from all that keeps us from being truly human. Hold on to the hope that comes in Jesus Christ. Be joyful at His coming! For God will not abandon or forsake you; God is with us; God will be with us; God will love us always.  
Amen, and Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Based on a description of a nativity scene at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as described by Thomas G. Long, in *Shepherds & Bathrobes* (Lima, OH: C>S>S> Pub. Co., 1987), 32. Quoted in Willimon, 26.