

**Luke 4: 14-21**

**Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C**

**January 26, 2025**

**The Rev. Katherine Bush**

*"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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" ... Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

"The year of the Lord's favor," a Jubilee year, was a particular kind of year. Every seven years, fields were rested and debts were canceled, and every fifty years, after seven sets of seven years, a jubilee year brought the return of property to its original inhabitants and the release of slaves and their descendants who had been sold into bondage. Jubilee years reminded everyone of the inherent dignity of work and of the land and of human flourishing - together.

And there's little to no evidence that jubilees in their fullest, most expansive possibility ever happened. It was "just an idea." Esteemed Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says the common questions posed to him about Israelite history and Jubilee years and Jubilee theology start with pulling the carpet out from under the concept, no one ever really did this, right? With the implied corollary, so we don't have to either, right? It was just an idea, maybe an ideal even, but still, it never came to much, we can move on.

After all, jubilee - though the word itself sounds light and fun - true jubilee is hard and demanding. We humans struggle against the impulse, getting caught up in the logistics and immediately sensing that the year of the Lord's favor would be a year of upheaval and disruption. Our imaginations run on the fuel of fear and scarcity, and when someone comes along to tell us about God's imagination of abundance and beauty, we can appreciate the idea, but often dismiss it and are prone to run those prophets right out of town. And anyway, it's just an idea. But in the real world, some people are poor, held captive by any number of forces, oppressed. Looking at this broken world around us, our capacity for imagining another kingdom becomes stunted. And more and more we are trained on algorithms that work on small, fast, cheap solutions. Jubilee is a huge, slow, costly vision. And besides, no one else ever really did this.

But Isaiah talked about this year of the Lord's favor, and whoever wrote down the law codes organizing the Israelites as they came into the Promised Land described the jubilee time in some detail, and the idea is woven through the scoldings and the dreams of prophets. And Jesus launches his life's very mission and meaning by standing up and saying, "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" ... Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Eugene Peterson translates this line, "It came true just now in this place." And all those folks in that synagogue could have looked around at their world, just like ours, and seen the sick and the blind and the broken-hearted, and thought, that's a nice idea. This boy of Joseph's is cute. We've been thinking about the year of the Lord's favor for at least seven hundred years ourselves, maybe longer. But no one ever has really managed to make Jubilee happen, so our belief, our hope,

has worn thin. It's so hard for our little hearts and minds to keep believing in such an audacious dream, and it's such a long time to keep believing when the year never seems to come around.

But Jesus didn't just believe in the year of the Lord's favor; he didn't just believe in Jubilee. Our friend Bruegemann says, "What [Jesus] meant was, 'I am Jubilee. Isaiah wrote about it. I am going to enact it.' And he set about" living Jubilee each and every day: including the excluded, opening eyes and ears, feeding the hungry, releasing bodies bound and minds bound too, welcoming women and sinners and wayward souls. Because as it turns out Jesus is the embodied imagination of God, and Jubilee then is more than just an idea, it's a way to live. Jesus is the way, he spoke the truth of God's holy imagination, his life is Jubilee. When he told his friends and neighbors that the scripture had been fulfilled that very day, he meant "Watch me; this is how to do it." It's coming true just now in this place.

Because it's so hard for our small hearts and minds to believe, Jesus came to show us how possible the impossible is. Believing in the idea of jubilee is the necessary first step, and our ancestors tended the fire of that belief for centuries before Jesus arrived. And in the centuries since then, when the vision became dim again and again, the dream of Jubilee persisted. And Jubilee actually happens all the time, every day. And it keeps happening in countless todays, people witnessing that "it came true just now in this place" in limited and in magnificent ways. Millions of todays haven't looked like jubilee, certainly, and millions of todays have looked just like jubilee for someone. Even as jubilee years didn't come, or came but not for everyone, or bloomed and faded, the idea of jubilee doesn't die. Because something that's "just an idea" when it's the idea of God can be powerful enough to move and shape individual hearts to bind up the broken and for households to light lamps in dark corners and for communities to seek out and bring forward good news and to keep nurturing hope.

When we get a sense of the timeline - years and todays start to shapeshift - the year of the Lord's favor and today? Well, seven or eight centuries passed between Isaiah's prophecies and the arrival of Jesus on the scene, and of course, another twenty centuries have flown by since Jesus read a few prophetic verses in his small hometown synagogue one Sabbath morning. That's a long time for an idea to persist. That's a lot of todays. That's a whole lot of todays in which people have imagined jubilee and felt its promising heft, and from time to time felt the release of so much weighing us down. And in the scale of God's cosmic time, last week or next week starts to feel a little different. And into our human timeline, Jesus arrives and says "today, it looks like this." Jubilee, the kingdom of God's imagining, is an idea that's just as real and present and possible as the realm of Caesar or anyone else. Poverty and oppression are real, and justice and mercy and healing are real too. Breaking news and dysfunction happen and gospel tidings of hope and love happen.

Jesus came to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and to call us to believe all over again in the idea of Jubilee, even when you can't see it, even when you're not sure if it could happen or has ever happened. Even when you look around your life, our city, the world and encounter crushing and grinding news - just like Isaiah's Israelites encountered, just like the congregation in Nazareth encountered. Even then, we like them insist on believing in this wild idea. And more than believing in Jubilee, Jesus shows us how to live a life of Jubilee, living in such a way that the evidence of Jubilee shows up in your words and choices and actions. Living jubilee by caring for those who are downtrodden and afraid, doing the next right thing you can do, and living jubilantly by celebrating every beautiful day with all its teeming possibilities. Even today. So that someone might say, "It's true just now in this place."