

Good News to the Oppressed

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Luke 1:46-55
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Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

It's the week before Christmas, and the sounds of the season are in the air. "Just hear those sleigh bells dingling, Ring-ting-ting-a-ling, too." Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer is shining up his very shiny nose; Jingle Bells are jingling all the way, while we're dashing through the snow, and Bing Crosby keeps dreaming of a "whiiiiite Christmas." It's a dreamy, dreamy atmosphere.

And then, you walk into church on the 3rd Sunday of Advent, and you hear Mother Mary signing the Magnificat, about how God is bringing down the powerful from their thrones, filling the hungry with good things, and sending the rich away with empty pockets, and the sermon title is "Good New to the Oppressed," a title taken from Isaiah 61's anointing of the Spirit of the Lord.

How did we get from Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer to "Good News to the Oppressed"?

It can be a little jarring, and you can almost get whiplash, when you travel from the shopping mall to the sanctuary. It may take your neck a couple of days to recover from the effects, and you might feel like you're experiencing vertigo. The world is desperately wanting to shine everything up and to cover everything with tinsel and gold, while the Bible is wanting to raise insistent, public questions about power and wealth and justice.

But then again, it has always been a little jarring to be a person, and a community, of faith living in a world that does not think you can really trust anyone, a world that tends to organize and protect itself from its own anxiety and uncertainty and suffering. For the church to be – as the church has been saying ever since Jesus' prayer for the church in John 17 – "in the world, but not of the world," for the church to engage and love the world, while having enough critical distance to notice the harmful things being done by the world, to participate joyfully in the life of the world without being overly accommodated to the world, these things have always meant that being a person and a community of faith means to be an odd fit in our world. For the church to retain its baptismal distinctiveness, its eucharistic saltiness, its covenantal flavor in the world, means that when we are baptized, we are committing ourselves to live with a certain amount of jarring whiplash, as we move back and forth from the Scriptures to the streets, from the manger of Jesus to the mall of commerce, and from the cross of Good Friday to the marketplace where greed and profit are pursued nonstop.

That odd fit, that jarring whiplash that you can feel during these weeks of Advent – and that doesn't initially feel very good – is, in fact, a sign that you're right where you need to be. Because there are a couple of ways for us to eliminate that feeling of whiplash as people of faith, and none of them are consistent with our calling. On the one hand, we could try to so blend in with the world, so accommodate ourselves to the pressures and the seductions and the priorities of the world that you stop being able to tell the difference between Christians and anybody else. Whenever we do that, when we try to fit in too hard with the world, the line between the ways of the church and the ways of the world becomes so blurry and smooth, that you begin to wonder if there's really any point to being the church. On the other hand, we could choose to so separate and insulate ourselves from the world and all of its messiness, chaos, and pain, keeping to our little Christian bubble where we congratulate ourselves on how holy we are, but where we start to look down our self-righteous noses at the rest of the world, and then it becomes no surprise that the world wants nothing to do with the church, because they think the church wants nothing to do with them.

No, neither complete accommodation to the world nor complete insulation from the world are what Jesus calls the church to. Jesus sends the church into the world from the heart of God, to bear God's good news to the world, "good news of great joy for all the people," as we will hear the angels sing on Christmas Eve from Luke 2.

That "good news for all people" involves the announcement of Isaiah 61 and Mary's Magnificat is that God will not tolerate public abuses of power forever. God will not tolerate the oppression and disenfranchisement of the poor, God will not forever tolerate the cynical uses of the law, or of religion, or of economic markets, to take advantage of those who lack the resources, the connections, or the power to take care of themselves.

If the good news is to be great joy for *all* the people, then it must first be good news for the poor, which is why when Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 in his inaugural sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4, he announces that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to bring "good news to the poor."

The transformation, the change, to which Christmas invites us is to be able to see that good news for the poor and oppressed ultimately turns out to be good news for the rich and powerful as well. When the beloved community is built, when the grieving ones are comforted, when the sinful ones are forgiven, when the broken ones have access to good, reliable healthcare, when the homeless ones are housed, when the hungry ones have adequately stocked refrigerators, when bitter enemies sit down at table together and share a meal, when the former devastations are raised up – as those things begin to happen, and these things will surely require everyone to give up something, they will require those of us with 2 coats to share 1 with our neighbor who doesn't have any, will require those with a super-abundance of material goods to share with those who are scratching to figure out whether to buy food or medication this

week, will require enemies to give up their long-cherished resentments and grievances for the sake of a new community – when these things begin to happen, it is good news for everybody, because the fabric of the whole community gets stronger, and people will not need to live in fear or suspicion of each other.

Now, we could say that these are just poems. Isaiah 61 and Mary's Magnificat are just poems, singing to us about a different world. But once you've heard these songs, you can't unhear them. They get inside of you, and they remind us that the faith of Jesus is, as we have said here so often, intensely personal, but never private. It is deeply and intensely true that the joy of Christmas is a *personal* joy. Jesus is coming for you, he is coming to save you, he is coming to love you, he is coming to be with you. The Christmas story is an intensely personal story.

But it is not a private story. It is not a story that is just about me or just about you. The light that shines in the darkness is never just about us. It is about the whole world, it is for the whole world. The coming of Jesus has public implications, where the beloved *community* is built, where the little ones are cared for, where the vulnerable ones are protected by the strong, where the despairing ones are given courage, where the lines of enmity and hostility are crossed by courageous disciples who are ready to follow Jesus into every corner of their lives and every corner of the world.

I love me some Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. And I love me some Jingle Bells. But the story of Jesus, the story of Mary, the story of Isaiah 61 is a much deeper story than the shiny stories of television commercials and online shopping. Christmas is about God's vulnerable entrance into the world to heal and transform the world from the inside out, to transform the world completely, starting with you and me, with all of our blind spots, all of our compulsions, all of our self-protective fears. Jesus is coming to turn us inside out. Good news for all the people. To God and to God alone, be all the glory, honor and praise. Amen.