

A Message of Joy – Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

In August of 2003 Lise and I took the kids up to Whitehorse, Yukon to visit Lise' mom and sisters. We enjoyed hikes around the city, site-seeing the old gold mines in the area and camping. It was a holiday so we were off the grid as much as possible, enjoying nature and not the TV. That is why we were so surprised when my folks phoned us from Kelowna and asked if we had been watching the news. We said, "No – what was happening?" They said the city was on fire and our house was on evacuation notice. What did we want saved from the house?

Quickly we turned on the television and found a news broadcast, discovering that a huge fire had started south of the city and it had entered the subdivisions on the outer edge of the city. Whole neighbourhoods were going up in flame. We were devastated to think that our city was being destroyed this way. We packed our bags and head south as quick as possible. Not only was our city under siege but our church family.

When we arrived in Kelowna the city was choked with thick smoke, and everything was covered in a layer of ash. The fire never did reach our street, but at night we could see the glow of the flames in the hills just south of us. My house and the church were untouched by the flames, but many others lost property and their homes. For many people who had been evacuated going back home was just as devastating as it was for the Jewish nation who first returned to Jerusalem after exile in the days of Isaiah. Everything was destroyed.

Fortunately we have not had to deal with that kind of disaster in Nanaimo. But there are people feeling that disaster has hit them this year – maybe through the loss of a loved one, the loss of a long anticipated vacation, the loss of a business, the battle with disease or addiction. For some the happy songs of Christmas are irritating and not soothing. The lights and decorations speak of a joy they are just not feeling. Is there a message of joy to replace the pain and sorrow some are feeling today? The answer is "yes" and we turn to the Old Testament prophet of Isaiah to discover the source of that joy.

Read text – Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

As the people in Isaiah's day first heard this passage, the mention of the one anointed by God would have caught their attention. You see, the word Messiah means "the anointed one," and so the Jews would be eager to hear what would happen when Messiah came.

The first we notice is that the message the Messiah would bring is a message of good news to the poor, healing for the brokenhearted and freedom for the captives and prisoners. The Messiah would proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. This was a reference to the year of Jubilee, one of the God instituted means of bringing equity and fairness to the nation.

Jubilee was a cycle of seven seven years – which would mean 49 years – with the 50th year being declared as a year of Jubilee. It was a time when all debts were forgiven. Can you imagine how wonderful that would be – to get a letter in the mail that said everything you owed – your mortgage, your credit card, your car loan – they are all forgiven. You are debt free! That is what Jubilee was to be like.

And since most of the people in the prisons of that day were there because they could not pay their debts, they would be set free as their debts were forgiven! Imagine a father finally able to come home to his family after years in prison simply because he did not have enough money to pay his debts. Imagine the joy and excitement as that father walked back into his house, seeing his wife and children after so many years!

This was God's design so people would not be destroyed by debt, or poverty. Even land that was sold in the last 50 years to help the family pay bills had to be returned to the original owners. You could not lose your land, because it was from the land that most people made their living.

Can you see how big a deal Jubilee would be? It would give the poor a chance to start all over, to get a second chance without the burden of debt or the loss of property. Sadly we have no record of Israel ever observing Jubilee in its history. But this was God's great plan to remind people they were to look after each other, not take advantage of each other.

These verses may have sounded familiar to you – “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” In Luke 4 we read how Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth and he was asked to read the portion of scripture for that day. The scroll was handed to Jesus and Isaiah 61 was the portion he read that day.

More important was the comment Jesus made on that scripture that day. Luke tells us that the eyes of everyone in the room were fixed on Jesus, waiting to hear what he would say. And what did he say? “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing!”

What? The year of the Lord's favour – Jubilee – had come? Would there truly be good news for the poor? Would prisoners and captives be set free? What did Jesus mean?

And here we find the wonderful message of the Gospel. Jesus came to bring good news to all of us. We are all the poor; we are all impoverished spiritually. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” But Jesus has a solution for that. He would take the debt of our sin on himself, pouring into us instead the riches of God's grace. We who were enslaved to sin and even Satan could be set free through faith in Jesus.

Dr. A. J. Gordon was pastor of a church in Boston many years ago. One day he met a little boy out in front of the church. The boy was carrying a rusty bird cage in his hands and several little birds were fluttering around on the bottom of the cage, as if they knew they were going to be destroyed.

Dr. Gordon said, “Son, where did you get those birds?” The boy answered, “I trapped them out in the field.” “What are you going to do with them?” the preacher asked. “I'm going to take them home and play with them and have some fun with them.” “What will you do with them when you get through playing with them?” Dr. Gordon asked. “Oh,” said the boy, “I guess I'll just feed them to an old cat we have around the house.”

Then Dr. Gordon asked the boy how much he would take for the birds and the boy answered, “Mister, you don't want these birds. They're just little old field birds and they can't sing very well.” Dr. Gordon said, “I'll give you two dollars for the cage and the birds.” “All right,” said the boy, “It's a deal, but you're making a bad bargain.”

The exchange was made and the boy went whistling down the street, happy because he had two dollars in his pocket. Dr. Gordon took the cage out behind his church and opened the door of the cage and the birds flew out and went soaring away into the blue, singing as they went.

The next Sunday Dr. Gordon took the empty bird cage to the pulpit to use it in illustrating his sermon. Then he said, "That little boy said that the birds could not sing very well, but when I released them from the cage they went singing away into the blue, and it seems that they were singing, "Redeemed, redeemed, redeemed." "1

Well, that is our song as we come to know Jesus as our personal Lord and Saviour. The day of salvation and Jubilee came in Jesus when he came so many years ago. Jesus came to pay our debt so we could have forgiveness and eternal life.

In Isaiah 61:3 it talks about the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of despair.

When Jesus comes into our lives things change – for the good. The brokenness of yesterday and the pain of our brokenness can be healed by his presence. Recently I heard of a pastor in our city who said he prayed with a woman who was living on the streets. She wanted to invite Jesus into her life, and when she did, something changed inside of her. Tears poured down her face as pains of the past were released into Jesus' hands and healing started. She still was on the street, she still did not have a home, but she was set free of the sin that had held her in its grip for so long. I believe her life changed that day and things will be better for her going forward.

In verse 4 it says they would rebuild the ancient ruins when Messiah came. They would get a second chance, a chance to start all over again. In Jubilee, when your debt was wiped away, you were given a second chance to provide for your family. You got to rebuild your business, your farm, your trade, your life.

And this is exactly what Jesus did for us. 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that if anyone is in Christ they are a new creation: the old is gone, the new has come.

All the mistakes of yesterday Jesus buries when he raises us to a new life in Him. Our failures and sins are buried in the sea of his forgetfulness never to be held against us – ever. Oh how wonderful! Jesus sets us free of our old life, no matter how messed up, and gives us a fresh start!

At the age of sixteen George Muller of Bristol, England, was imprisoned for theft; and later at the university he lived a life of drinking and partying, acting dishonestly even toward his friends. At twenty years of age he came under the influence of the Bible, and the miracle of regeneration was wrought. He who had been a thief was now so utterly a new creature that in the course of the years he gave away, of the money sent to him for his personal use, no less a sum than \$135,000, and when he died his personal possessions were valued at less than \$1,000. He cared for over 10,000 orphans in his lifetime and started 117 schools offering Christian education to over 120,000 children.

—*Christian Digest*²

Aren't you glad Jesus gives us a second, third, or fourth chance in life?

¹ Tan, P. L. (1996). [Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times](#) (p. 1231). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

² Tan, P. L. (1996). [Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times](#) (p. 1230). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.

Interesting to note that when Jesus read the scripture from Isaiah 61 he stopped before he got to the line, “the day of vengeance of our God.”

You see, Jesus came the first time to bring salvation, but he will come again to bring judgment. When Jesus comes again he will bring history to its end and we will be brought before the judgment seat of God. There the only question that will really matter is, ‘What did we do with Jesus?’

Those who repented of their sin and sought forgiveness and life in Jesus will have their names in the Lamb’s book of life and they will enter heaven. Those who turned their backs on Jesus, who refused the offer of forgiveness and life through faith in him will be condemned for all eternity.

The last part of the passage speaks of the life the followers of Messiah will live. They will love justice and mercy. They will be looking for ways to bring hope and joy to people even when a pandemic strikes and forces us to isolate. This may mean delivering cheer packages to the doors of church members, or encouraging people to support local businesses, or dropping gifts and cards off to friends just to say we care.

And notice the response at the end of this passage by those who meet the Messiah. Verse 10 says, “I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul rejoices in my God.” Why? Because “he has clothed me with garments of salvation.”

It does not matter how broken our lives were before we met Jesus, but He has puts the pieces together once again and makes us whole. We still have troubles and trials, sure, but we now have His help to get through every challenge. We have His presence which brings hope and peace. And knowing God is with us – no matter what we face – we have joy.

One of the most precious possessions of the British Museum is what is known as the Portland Vase. It is a work of perfect and incomparable beauty. One day a madman, passing through the room in which it was exhibited, struck it with his stick, and smashed it into fragments. There it lay, its beauty gone, a thing for pity and for tears. But one, with infinite patience and with love, came and gathered the pieces together and built it up again with such genius and success that only with careful examination can the fact of its ruin be observed.³

That is the story of our lives.

“Shackled by a heavy burden. Neath a load of sin and shame. Then the hand of Jesus touched me, and now I am no longer the same. He touched me – oh, he touched me – and oh the joy that floods my soul. Something happened, and now I know – He touched me and made me whole.”

³ Tan, P. L. (1996). [*Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*](#) (pp. 1231–1232). Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.