

Life Light

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 and John 1:6-8, 19-28

December 17, 2023

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*Standing in line, marking time
Waiting for the welfare dime
'Cause they can't buy a job
The man in the silk suit hurries by
As he catches the poor old lady's eyes
Just for fun he says, "Get a job"
That's just the way it is
Some things will never change
That's just the way it is*

The lyrics commence Bruce Hornsby's number one hit released in 1986 (a fact I know ages me and one that I struggle to believe). Hornsby does not end the refrain with "That's just the way it is." He instead adds, "Ah, but don't you believe them" before continuing to make explicit reference to the Economic Opportunity and Civil Rights Acts of 1964.

*That's just the way it is
Some things will never change
That's just the way it is
Ah, but don't you believe them
Who or what do you believe?*

Do you believe the voices who proclaim that the way things are today are the way things will always be—that people considered poor will always be poor, those held captive will always be held captive, and the oppressed will always be oppressed?

Or can you imagine a world in which every individual and community are set free to live the kind of life any good parent longs for their child to live—with food, shelter, safety, community, opportunities to work, and proper care for one's body and mind?

When do we conclude that whatever sadness, unpleasantness, or adversity we witness or experience today will continue to be present tomorrow?

And when do we muster the courage, hope, or audacity to live in a way that reveals how everything is capable of being transformed?

I have been pondering all week what it might feel like to be a citizen of Gaza where entire neighborhoods have been reduced to dust, infrastructure for water and sewage has been destroyed, lights have been turned off, and an "estimated 80 percent of Gazans have been displaced by the war..."¹

Would I have the courage to believe I could one day return home, reopen my small business, and walk along a city sidewalk as I reminisced with a neighbor?

¹ Adam Taylor, "Unexploded bombs, many U.S.-made, could make parts of Gaza uninhabitable," in *The Washington Post*, December 6, 2023.

Or would my mind be limited to the sight of utter destruction as permanently etched in my memory as a sailor's tattoo?

How much of what we see, "is just the way it is?"

And how much of what we see is awaiting promised transformation by God who, throughout scripture, declares love of justice, comfort for all who mourn, and a release of whatever prevents a person from living the life they have been called and created to live?

The community to whom Isaiah prophesies could have easily held more proclaimers of doom than tenders of hope. Many decades have passed since they and their ancestors were placed in forced detention in Babylon following the conquest of their kingdom and destruction of the temple in 586. Finally, a new Persian leader, Cyrus the Great, has risen to power and is granting permission for the people to return to Palestine.

Those who are going home have heard voices of earlier prophets who promised restoration. They believed their words to be true and expected to discover all they once loved gloriously rebuilt and restored. What they instead found were innumerable hardships and obstacles that had to be overcome.

But God does not leave them alone.

Rather, God promises provision, protection, and restoration through the voice of a human agent whom Yahweh has summoned and authorized. While it is not clear if the servant about whom Isaiah speaks is an individual or a community, God has equipped a partner to transform all who have been rendered weak, powerless, and marginalized by bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

It does not matter if it is year 547, 546, or 545 BCE, it is the year of the Lord's favor, a year that offers tangible freedom. Jerome Creach explains how "Israel's legal traditions were designed to limit debt slavery to seven years." In addition to the release of these debts every seven years, there was a tradition that included "the return of ancestral land every fifty years to ensure that no family was impoverished generation after generation."² Debt forgiveness was built into the laws of the land! However, these laws were not consistently observed, making jubilee a hoped for promise instead of a current reality. But these traditions are about to be embodied again in a way that ushers in "a new era in which all forms of servitude and all circumstances of mourning are overturned."³

God has and will deliver all who are burdened and oppressed.

Much of today's text appears in the gospel of Luke in a passage I have long articulated as one of my favorites. We read in Luke 4 about Jesus returning to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, where he unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah before seemingly combining several of his favorite verses to proclaim, "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

² Jerome F.D. Creach in *Connections, Year B, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010) 35.

³ Creach, 36.

Lord's favor."⁴ But Jesus does not end there. He instead sat down, and with all eyes fixed on him announced, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."⁵

The human agent about whom Isaiah prophesied is in your midst! This mission of radical restoration belongs to him. Though the hometown community was initially delighted with this son of their synagogue, the reality of the poor receiving good news, the captives being released, and the oppressed being set free filled them with enough rage to drive Jesus out of town and attempt to toss him off a cliff. Jesus' ways were and are a threat to all who exercise their power by getting ahead on the backs of others.

While the faithful folk of Nazareth were not ready to receive a message about the radical reordering of the human community, they could see something in Jesus that enabled them to believe he had the power to bring it to fruition.

What about us?

How much change and transformation do we believe Jesus and those who follow him have the power to bring about today?

The *Washington Post* published an interview on Friday with Ghassan Abu Sitta, a British Palestinian doctor who recently returned home to his work as a reconstructive plastic surgeon in London after spending six weeks caring for the wounded in Gaza City as a volunteer with Doctors Without Borders.

"Those 43 days were among the most challenging and gruesome periods in the 54-year-old's medical career, he said. But they were also marked by scenes of humanity and love and—in certain moments—unexpected levity," the *Post* reported.

Dr. Abu Sitta shared, "I was saying to somebody what happens when you live in the death world is that people start resisting the death world through acts of love. They become acts of resistance. There was a little boy, he was 3 years old, we didn't know his name at al-Ahli (hospital). I amputated his leg and his arm. And the following day when I went to check up on him, the woman whose son was wounded in the bed next to him had him on her lap and was feeding him and her son, because he had no family. We didn't even know his name because he was so young. These acts of love, these acts of kindness, people taking in people and even letting them stay in their houses for the whole war because they'd lost their homes. There was kind of almost a dissolution of individualism, and a return to old communal life, that everything gets shared. Food gets shared. Medication gets shared. Houses get shared, and that kind of dissolution is amazing."⁶

What happens when you live in the death world is that people start resisting the death world through acts of love.

Beloveds, resisting the death world through acts of love is what continues to nurture my belief in God's goodness today. This sacred resistance is also the foundation of my favorite definition of joy as I believe joy is an act of resistance against the forces of despair.

⁴ Luke 4:18-19.

⁵ Luke 4:21.

⁶ "A doctor went to Gaza to help. What he saw there still haunts him." *The Washington Post*, online, December 15, 2023.

How, then, are we—people who have been baptized with water *and* the Spirit—called to resist the death world—the world that proclaims how poverty, oppression, evil, and injustice—are just the way it is—through acts of love?

What might we play a role in radically restoring in the new year upon us?

Where might we ensure that voices of despair are countered with, “Ah, but don’t you believe them”?

I sometimes struggle to believe in miracles, at least as we understand them on the pages of scripture when it appears Jesus acts alone to do something magical.

But I have seen miracles come to fruition through this congregation.

Fifteen years ago, one of our former interns invited people in our congregation to take in two of our unhoused neighbors for Christmas. I thought her invitation was audacious. But two of you welcomed these men into your home as both Christmas Day and the due date of your first child approached.

More than a decade ago, a woman working as a barista at the Starbucks at 901 New York Avenue called. “I know your congregation cares about people because I have often boxed up the leftover pastries for your shower ministry. My family is scheduled to come home for Christmas, and I just got an eviction notice. Can you help me?” I put a request on our congregation’s joys and concerns page on Facebook and watched as the amount needed was promised within two hours.

These acts might be considered small. But imagine how much debt could be released, beds provided, stomachs filled, hearts healed, vulnerable cared for, and justice sought if every church was a courageous community committed to bringing comfort to one or two despairing or devastated neighbors.

Earlier this month, French President Emmanuel Macron visited the Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris before announcing that the restoration of the grand house of worship destroyed by fire in 2019 was on schedule to reopen to worshippers and tourists next December. Restorations, which are projected to cost \$865 million, are detailed through a website that notes how “Almost one thousand people work daily” for the restoration of the cathedral—“more than 500 workers, craftspeople, and supervisors work on site, with almost as many contributing from workshops throughout France.”⁷

I have visited the cathedral, like thousands of other tourists in Paris. I do not doubt the role it plays in this magical European city. And, in writing about Isaiah’s prophesy, Paul Hanson notes how what is built in obedience to God always goes beyond bricks and mortar. “By placing God’s justice and mercy at the heart of the rebuilding project, the Servant enables the community to reach the highest purpose possible for any human group, ‘to display God’s glory.’”⁸

Do you hear what I hear?

People might say “that’s just the way it is.”

But don’t you believe them.

⁷ <https://www.friendsofnotredamedeparis.org/notre-dame-progress-update-2023/#:~:text=They%20completed%20the%20stone%20arches,their%20original%20form%20and%20structure.>

⁸ Paul Hanson, *Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1995), 224-25.