



New Year is a fascinating day. It is a day on which we look back and reminisce what has transpired, both the good and the difficult. And we also look forward with a belief that change is possible. This is why gym memberships increase the first six weeks of the year; it is a sign of our hope that tomorrow can be different from yesterday.

But we somehow lose this hope along the way. Think back to December (just last week): you were exhausted and worn out. The joys of life can sometimes be accompanied by deep questions about the world and about ourselves. We look at the world and the despair of life in a sin-marred weighs heavy. The tragedy in international news or the tragedy of the stories of people in our own relationship circles weigh heavy upon us. In addition, we look at ourselves and see that we are not yet who we want to be or where we want to be. We work, pray, pay, sacrifice, clamor to understand what it means to be more fully who we were created to be. But it often ends with more questions than when we began our search.

Somehow, somewhere along the past 12 months, your future became filled with questions and concerns that edged out the hope that seems almost tangible today. The ancient prophet Isaiah spoke to a group of people with an uncertain future, and offered a message of hope that has meaning for us as we enter into the new year.

Isaiah was a prophet in the eighth century BC (731-681 BC). Ancient prophets had a fascinating role. Prophets both challenged those out of step with God, and prophets spoke comfort to those trying to live as God was calling them to live. And they proclaimed their message by speaking into the current reality and the future. They took into account the current flesh and blood realities of the world, while also pointing toward God's future.

In Isaiah's day, the people had turned away from God, choosing obedience to sin rather than obedience to God. Living outside of the design of God had brought the people to the brink of destruction.

Isaiah's message is that in light of the sin of the people, exile is coming—both a physical exile (to the foreign nation of Babylon), but also a spiritual sense of exile filled with questions about their relationship with God and God's relationship with His people.

But exile would not be the end. God would restore His people; not just return from their physical exile, but God would also do a new work of renewal of the human condition. Within these declarations of hope is Isaiah 61.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,

because the Lord has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim freedom for the captives

and release from darkness for the prisoners,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor

and the day of vengeance of our God,

to comfort all who mourn,

and provide for those who grieve in Zion—

to bestow on them a crown of beauty

instead of ashes,

the oil of joy

instead of mourning,

and a garment of praise

instead of a spirit of despair (verses 1-3a).

Several things stand out from the text. In verse 1, the speaker is characterized as the "Anointed One." This is a person: distinct from God's people, one who possess the Spirit of the Lord, who is God's spokesperson, and—more than simply a preacher—one who will do the work of the Lord on earth. The Anointed One will usher in the kingdom of God and the renewal of His people.

We see some of what the Anointed will do in verses 1-3. The Anointed will proclaim good news to the poor. Poor certainly incorporates those in financially destitute, but there is a wider sense as well (especially when we encounter the Gospels). "Poor" carries a sense of "those the world tends to forget or mistreat." These are the people that the Anointed came to redeem.

The text continues... the Anointed came to bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom to the captives, and to announce "the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." This is a fascinating verse. We don't often think of "favor" and "vengeance" as a couple. But I think that part of the idea is that in order to bring good, evil must be acknowledged as wrong and dealt with accordingly. You know this if you've ever experienced

injustice. You desired for good to be done, but you also longed that someone would declare the wrong done to you as wrong. Some of my personal meaningful moments of comfort have been a good friend saying, "what was done to you was wrong." For God's justice to reign, the Anointed will both bring good and deal with evil.

This idea of the "year of the Lord" has connection to a concept in Leviticus 25: the Year of Jubilee. After seven sets of seven years, the priests were to go throughout the land and blow a loud horn, announcing a "release" (literally, "freedom") [Lev 25.8]. There would be a forgiveness of debt, return to each person's property, and the land would be at rest from work. The "year of the Lord" brings that idea of forgiveness and freedom, and brings in what we see in this text: a renewal of human condition.

The poor, the brokenhearted, and also those who mourn will be comforted. They will be given a crown of beauty and a garment of praise. Ashes were placed on the head in the ancient days and used a sign of mourning. Oil was used to soothe and brighten the spirits. So, we see in the Anointed One someone who will not simply come with a good sermon or shake a few hands and offer a quick smile. Rather, this is someone who will both speak and act to bring God's purposes in the world. This is someone who will turn an upside-down world right-side up.

We can see the need for renewal all around us. Our church in France supported a local non-profit called Un Toit, which translated, means "a roof." Un Toit worked with the city to provide housing for homeless or families in need. We gave financially, but also practically sought ways to help. Several of us spent a morning cleaning and painting a small, ground floor studio in our town that was being readied for a new family in need. I was painting next to a college student who was part of our church community but was still exploring Jesus. She didn't necessarily believe what we believed about Jesus, but she liked us and believed that we could make a difference by painting that apartment. Our honest conversations on faith and life during those several hours of work, and our painting that apartment to help a family in need are each a glimpse of an upside-down world being turned right-side up again.

Because of this gift, in verse 3 we see that the people of God will be called "oaks of righteousness." Using the image of a large oak tree, life that was previously weak (poor, brokenhearted) would now be endued with power. Life that seemed previously unstable (captivity, mourning) would now be firmly planted. And this planting would be "of the Lord." It is the work of God. This is a gift of God to His people. It is a work of the Lord's grace and it is done for the "display of His splendor"—to declare both to His people and the world the grace and power of God.

Isaiah looks to a new day, "the year of the Lord's favor." This will be a new season in which God, through His Anointed One, will set the world right by two main things. First, bringing an end to despair, the despair of life in a sin-marred world. These were people facing poverty, captivity, slavery, mourning in their everyday reality. The Anointed One would one day usher in the end of despair. Second, the Anointed One would bring renewal to the human condition. He would restore the people of God. As much as the people suffered from poverty, captivity, slavery, and mourning in their everyday reality, there was also a spiritual dynamic that needed to be redeemed.

All of this would be brought about by The Anointed, who would speak and act to bring God's future into the world. In fact, in Hebrew, there was a term for this "Anointed One"—Messiah. Later, in Greek, the term used was "Christ."

Hold Isaiah 61 in your mind and turn to Luke 4. Seven hundred years after Isaiah 61 comes this action by Jesus, beginning in verse 16a.

"He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom."

Jesus is in his hometown and on the Sabbath—Saturday—He goes to Synagogue "as was His custom." Jesus did not abandon community worship. The synagogue was like an outpost of Temple worship. For those communities too far from the Temple in Jerusalem, synagogue was the place for corporate prayer, where Scripture was read and taught.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (verses 16b-19).

The way that the Scripture was read and taught in synagogue was this: first someone stood out of reverence to read from the law, then someone read from the prophets, and then they sat down and taught the congregation on what was read. Jesus read from the prophets. He is handed the scroll of Isaiah. Isaiah was popular in Jesus' day. In fact, a complete copy was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls dating back to the second century BC. Jesus reads from a portion of Isaiah 61:1-2, with a reference to Isaiah 58:6, "set the oppressed free."

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (verses 20-21).

Jesus teaches on what He just read with two unbelievable implications. First, He says, "today," which may seem inconsequential. We see this word show up in several places in Luke that in context signify "today" as not simply an ordinary day, but highlighting God's future is being brought into the present. For example, think of a verse that you probably heard or read at some point last week: Luke 2:11: *"today in the town of David, a Savior is born, He is the Messiah, the Lord."* And Jesus' gripping interaction with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:9: *"today salvation has come to this house."* "Today" signifies the work of God pushing into the present. Certainly, Jesus' audience in synagogue would be eager for God to work. Where can we go to see God's power and action? Where can we find God at work in our day?

This is where Jesus says something stunning. Today, this Scripture is fulfilled "in your hearing." Jesus says that what Isaiah prophesied about—God setting the upside-down world right-side up—is occurring in and through Jesus. Jesus aligns Himself as the Anointed One who will do what Isaiah prophesied about. Jesus will usher in the kingdom of God, bringing an end to despair of and change the human condition.

This is the type of thing that frustrated and fascinated people in Jesus' day. Jesus did not consider Himself simply as a prophet or teacher. Rather, Jesus identified Himself as the servant of the Father in the world, the Anointed One. And it was only through Jesus that life could be made new; it was only through Jesus that people could return to God from their spiritual exile.

This also what is frustrating and fascinating about Jesus today. A few years ago, I was talking with a French friend of mine at a cafe as he was disturbed by Jesus's exclusive claims that life with the heavenly Father is only through His Son. In an age of extreme inclusivity, Jesus' claims about Himself can seem off-putting, to say the least. But these were not the empty claims of an arrogant man; Jesus both spoke and acted to bring about the kingdom of God.

This is what Jesus did. First, Jesus brought an end to despair. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus offers hope and meaning to suffering in the everyday reality of life in this sin-marred world. Jesus defeated the greatest enemy—death; our future is not pointless but can be spent with God. Second, Jesus offers a change for the condition of humanity. When the issue of sin resides **in** us, our only hope for redemption is someone outside **of** us doing something **for** us.

The "poor, prisoners, blind, oppressed"—these are the people that Jesus came to save, to redeemed, to restore. These are the recipients of the Lord's favor. These are not perfect people getting a little better, but the ones for whom "the year of the Lord's favor" means life can truly start again, these people like you and me. Jesus died, bearing the punishment for our sin, and He was raised to life, defeating death and ushering in new life. Things can be different, you can be different because of Jesus.

Here's what I want to challenge you to do: take some time to remember how God was at work in your life during 2016. Hilary and I did a similar exercise when we left France after almost nine years. Instead of flying, we decided to take a cruise ship from England to New York. It was one of those ships that had shows and lectures. As we journeyed past the site of the sinking of the Titanic, the ship offered a lecture on that tragedy... which was just weird. Please don't tell us about a ship that met a horrific icy end while on a ship!

The reason we took the cruise ship was, not only that it was cheaper than flying, but it gave us almost a week to look back at what God had done and look forward to what He would do in the future. We had a blue notebook and we wrote down ideas and dreams for the future ahead that we were trusting God to do.

You can do this same thing with your children, small group, or individually. The challenge is introspection and authenticity, to be honest where God has been challenging you, growing you, and calling you to live more fully in the way of Jesus.

Here are some questions that can help:

1. Where have you seen glimpses of hope in the midst of your despair?
 2. How has God been growing and bringing renewal in you?
- And then take it one step farther. As you look to 2017, ask God to show you where He is at work in your family, in this city, in your sphere of influence. There are people that God is calling you to this year. Here are some questions to help:
3. Where is God calling you to follow Jesus in bringing hope?
 4. Where is God calling you to follow Jesus in bringing renewal?

Restoration, freedom, comfort, joy are things that we all work, pray, and sacrifice to receive. The disappointment is that we may not realize that these are things that only Jesus can bring. If you cling wholly to Jesus, this New Year can truly be a new year; a new season of life and renewal for you and the people that God is calling you to this new year.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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