

“The Year of Whose Favor?”—Isaiah 61:1-3

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “The Year of Whose Favor?”, is Isaiah 61:1-3 → *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. 1Timothy 1:2). Amen.

How would you describe a *year of the LORD’s favor*? Many may define it as a year filled with good health, happiness and prosperity. Ever received or sent a Christmas greeting which included words such as, “may you have a healthy and prosperous new year?” Aside from simply

an excuse to party, “ringing in the new year” can be filled with joy over the chance to “start over again,” hopeful for a better life in the new year, however one may understand life being “better.”

Over the past nine months I’ve heard many statements expressing the desire to be done with the year 2020. Why? Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? Feeling captive to an unseen enemy called the corona virus; witnessing its affects in the sicknesses and even death of family and friends, leaving many *brokenhearted* and mourning; driving some people into bankruptcy, not just financially but also emotionally and even spiritually with fear, worry and a feeling of despair; demanding us to change the comfortable ways in which we lived in a day; creating fear and sometimes a feeling of suspicion, even to the point of crippling or destroying relationships. Even with the outpouring of human care for one another it certainly may not be considered by many as a favorable year, let along a *year of **the LORD’s** favor*.

The words of our text are words of good news and hope spoken to people living in hopelessness and despair. The people to whom the prophet Isaiah was speaking in his context were in a desperate situation: The nation of Israel had been conquered, many had been killed, the temple was destroyed and those who were still alive were carried off into exile to Babylon. Certainly they were *poor* from a standard of living

perspective. They had basically lost everything they owned. Broken hearts were evident everywhere as family and friends had been killed or separated from one another. They grieved, mourning the loss of loved ones, their possessions and their homeland. The circumstances were “ripe” for a spirit of despair where death may have looked more desirable than being a prisoner of war.

I wonder how those people processed Isaiah’s words proclaiming *the year of Yahweh’s favor and the day of vengeance of . . . God?* He even pictured it in verse 3 of our text as giving *them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes* (which were placed on the head while mourning the loss of loved ones), *the oil of gladness instead of mourning* (making their countenance radiant instead of downcast), *the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit* (which was characterized by wearing sackcloth). Their being *called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD* implied occupying their homeland again permanently. While his words may have fell on deaf ears in their struggles because it sounded to many like a fairy tale where everyone would live happily ever after, Isaiah was compelled to still speak such words. Whether or not the people wanted to hear them they still had to be proclaimed. Maybe the people even reacted to his words adversely since his words didn’t necessarily make life at that moment any better and it seemed more like the year of

Babylon's favor rather than *the year of the LORD's favor*.

How about you? You can relate, can you not? Aside from the corona virus we've still had to deal with the violence, injustices, murder, rioting, slander, maliciousness—the basic depravity of people in their sin during this year as well. It would seem that *the year of the LORD's favor* wouldn't be filled with all such vices. In fact, as we view the difficulties with sin which we face in our lives each day, it may feel more like the time of the devil's power rather than *the year of the LORD's favor*. I suppose it's possible that one may associate *the LORD's favor* with *the vengeance of . . . God* when wrongdoers finally “get's theirs” in the end. How do **you** hear and process these words of hope from Isaiah?

They are not just words of hope and comfort proclaimed by Isaiah to make the people feel better in their situations. Rather, they described actions which will happen in people's lives in the Person & Work of He Who has been *anointed by the Spirit of the Lord GOD* to do so. It is a promise of Yahweh's Anointed One, His Messiah. In Acts 10:38 Peter spoke about *how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power*, which was evidenced at His baptism. *He went about doing good and healing all who were **oppressed by the devil**, for God was with Him*. This involved much more than simply giving people a better standard of living. It involved restoring a perfect relationship with

God by dealing with our sin once and for all, by destroying *the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and delivering all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery* in sin (cf. Hebrews 2:14-15). It involved restoring a perfect relationship with God, with one another and with all creation forever at the restoration of all things in “the life of the world to come.”

At the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry He read this prophecy while attending worship one Sabbath. Luke 4:21 records His interpretation of it when He said: ***Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*** This prophecy was fulfilled in His presence. At first *all spoke well of Him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from His mouth* (cf. Luke 4:22). By the time He was done talking they tried to kill Him. Even with God’s Anointed Son in their presence it didn’t seem like it was *the year of the LORD’s favor*.

But things are not always what they seem, especially when it comes to the LORD’s working in your life. His ways and thoughts are not your ways and thoughts (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9), *the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men* (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:25). Thus, *the year of the LORD’s favor* is not a particular year from your calendar **but God’s gracious activity in Christ every moment of every day of your life**. It is actualized in the work of Jesus for you **today**.

Consider:

- God's *favor* comes not only in His power giving you the ability to get wealth (cf. Deuteronomy 8:18), but in the poverty of His Son Who makes you rich in grace. 2 Corinthians 8:9 says: *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.*
- God's relief comes not only in His ability to deliver you from the captivities of your circumstances, but allowing His Son to be captive to those nails on the cross so you can be freed from your slavery to sin.
- God's binding *up the brokenhearted* comes not only in His removing your grief and sorrow, but in His Son's broken and bruised body on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for your sins. *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.* (cf. 1 Peter 2:24)
- God's comfort is not found primarily in temporary solutions to your personal struggles, but in His permanent solution to your temporary struggles in His Son's glorious resurrection from the dead, which you will fully realize in "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting" on the Last Day. Thus, we *consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to*

be revealed to us (cf. Romans 8:18).

This is truly *the year of the LORD's favor* as you respond to the Holy Spirit's call, repent of your sins, and trust in the Christ's atoning work for you. 2 Corinthians 6:1-2 tells *you not to receive the grace of God in vain*. For God says, "*In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.*" Behold, *now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation*. Today is the time of the LORD's favor as Jesus is born anew in your heart by faith so that the LORD *may be glorified* in you. So we pray . . .

O holy Child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray;

Cast out our sin, and enter in, Be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels The great glad tidings tell;

Oh, come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Immanuel!

(LSB 361:4)

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