

“The Year of God’s Favor”  
Luke 4:14-21

Last year around this time, we all witnessed a historic moment for our country. The inauguration of Barack Obama was historic on so many different levels for our country. Most of us on his inauguration day listened carefully to what he had to say because we believed that this would be the statement about his vision and mission as a president. I am sure that every word that he said on that day took a great deal of preparation and thinking. Now that we have had a year to watch our president in action, many of us are reviewing his actions according to the statements he made on that day. Some of the reviews are positive and yet others are negative. This practice of giving an inaugural presentation is typical of most leaders in the world both religious and secular. These statements can be defining mission statements or just flowery rhetoric of empty promises. Today’s Bible story from Luke 4 tells about the inaugural speech which Jesus gave at the beginning of his ministry. It was his mission statement and his speech writer was the Prophet Isaiah. His mission was a direct quote from the book of Isaiah with a special focus on the “year of the Lord’s favor.” What was Jesus talking about? The phrase, the year of the Lord’s favor, that is found in Isaiah and quoted by Jesus as recorded in Luke is a reference to Jubilee. Jubilee was a biblical legislation to help form a community that could practice the love of God in practical ways. The covenant that God established with the people of Israel covered all aspects of life from the spiritual to the most mundane. According to Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15, during a Jubilee year, which was supposed to happen every 50 years (the cycle of seven sabbatical years), the Hebrews were called to practice four things: 1. To forgive all debts, 2. To free all the slaves, 3. To let the land rest, i.e., lie fallow, 4. To return the birthright land to those who lost it. This was a call for a reversal of fortunes to ensure that all people had their basic needs met.

By proclaiming the year of the beginning of his ministry as a Jubilee year, Jesus was calling his people to a practice which could bring social justice to their community, just as God had called the people of Israel when the original Law of the covenant was given to them through Moses. How did the people receive this proclamation? Some liked it but some hated it. Jesus was heard gladly by some people (Lk 4:22), but was heard badly by others, most likely by the synagogue leaders (Lk 4:28-30). It is surprising to see this kind of response. After all, Jesus was supposedly preaching to the choir. He was preaching in a place where people knew about the covenant and the Law. What could possibly have been so upsetting to them in what he said?

The call to practice Jubilee in all of its fullness was offensive to the religious leadership of the day. Of course they knew what Jesus was talking about. It was not a new teaching per se. But they felt threatened by the message because Jesus was asking them to practice what they preached in its fullness. They had focused on the spiritual aspects of practicing the Law. The only stipulation that they practiced from the Jubilee legislation was letting the land lie fallow. Jesus’ call was for a total commitment to the year of the Lord’s favor and not just to practicing the things that were comfortable to the elite who accumulated too much wealth at the expense of others. The religious leadership was co-opted by the powers of control and domination over the people. The Roman government taxed the people and so did the religious leadership. If they were really to practice the Year of the Lord’s Favor, that would have meant losing their wealth and status to allow the people to have fair opportunities to have enough to take care of their basic needs. No wonder those who were in power did not like what they heard from Jesus!

But how did Jesus deliver on his promises? Did he live according to the vision he proclaimed from Isaiah or did he fail? Well, there were no op-ed articles in the paper from his time evaluating his ministry. But there was the witness of the people who saw firsthand what Jesus did and how he lived. These testimonies got recorded later in the Gospel of Luke as a witness to his ministry

showing that the theme of Jubilee is lifted up as what Jesus practiced from his birth till his death and resurrection. The Gospel of Luke is filled with stories about Jesus' identification with the poor, his call to the rich to deal with their money as it stood between them and God, and his confrontation of the systems. It is filled with stories of miraculous healings, exorcisms and transformation of people – a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, and a widow's son. And those healed are primarily the expendable ones and peasants. Every day of his life on earth, Jesus lived out this vision of the Kingdom of God as a practice of Jubilee, even when this ministry and message led him to the ultimate confrontation with the powers of the corrupt kingdoms of world.

The verses which Jesus read from Isaiah as his mission statement are also the mission statement for us as the church, the body of Jesus Christ. We are called to be involved in those ministries that set the captives free, bring good news to the poor and make the year of the Lord's favor our agenda in our world today. It is a call for us to be about the business of asking, "Who are the poor in our world today? What is good news to them? Who are the captives in our world today? What could bring them release? Who are the blind today? What could bring them sight? Who are the oppressed today? What could bring them freedom? What would the year of the Lord's favor look like today?" It is easy to look at President Obama to try and see how he is doing on fulfilling his mission. But it is much harder to look at our mission as followers of Christ, especially as it relates to our politics, wealth, culture and even personal commitments. Our prejudices and our fears can get in the way of the gospel. Even though we agree and believe in the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it is difficult to put our beliefs into practice in concrete ways. The story is told about Rigoberta Menchú, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and a former Guatemalan presidential candidate. One day she went to Mexico at the invitation of the President to help with conference on drinking water and sanitation. She was wearing a Mayan dress, a "*weepil*," the traditional attire of indigenous people in Central America, and the hotel's response was also traditional: they threw her out. Staff at Cancun's five-star Hotel Coral Beach appeared to have assumed this was another street vendor or beggar, so without asking questions, they ordered her to leave. Some of the guests who were in the lobby recognized Ms. Menchú and interceded on her behalf. It was ironic to see how the same resorts who were selling Mayan tourism would discriminate against a real person from that heritage. Sometimes we want to be committed to social justice, but it is hard to practice it.

Another challenge for us is being aware of the issues and struggles for justice in our world today. The issues surrounding poverty, oppression, and captivity are complex and often changing which requires a deep commitment on our part to always seek new ways of fulfilling the vision of Jesus for the kingdom of God. In the U.S., most of our low income families are people with jobs. The UN forecasts that today's urban population of 3.2 billion will rise to nearly 5 billion by 2030, when three out of five people will live in cities. One billion people, about one-sixth of the world's population, now live in slums with tremendous social problems such as crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, poverty, poor family planning, and unemployment. By 2030, over 2 billion people in the world will be living in slums.

The social challenges of our world are daunting and we can just focus on the personal aspects of our faith, but we are invited to remember and trust that the same Spirit that anointed Jesus to do his ministry against the challenges of the occupation of the Roman Empire and the corruption of the religious leadership is the same Spirit that is anointing us today. We can think and act scared against all the struggles of our lives and our world, or we can proclaim the vision of Jesus' ministry as our own to live lives full of meaning and commitment.

As we remember today the lives of our loved ones who died last year, we lift up their example of service and how they fulfilled the year of the Lord's favor in their own unique ways. Last May I had

the privilege of officiating at the memorial service for one of our older church members. Her name was Thelma Ford. Thelma was an active member of this congregation for many years. But in the last few years, she was away from us due to ill health. I never got to meet her personally, but I was amazed at her life story and how much her friends loved her. Thelma was a strong woman of faith and had the ability to live out her faith in practical ways. Thelma loved God's creation and creatures. She loved nature and people. One of the ways Thelma fulfilled the vision of Jesus found in Luke 4 was through her gift of sharing her resources. This was a calling between Thelma and her God. Thelma had this amazing gift of helping others to thrive in life. If she found out that someone needed money to start a business or to put a down payment on a home, she loaned them the money at a low interest rate so that they could afford it. She had this set up with her bank and was able to offer thirty-five to forty loans during her lifetime. She believed not in giving a handout but in helping people become independent. In 2006 a man in Bangladesh named Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize for helping develop the idea and practice of micro loans to poor people so that they could start their own businesses. It is amazing to find someone who had the same idea right here in our corner of the world in Batavia, NY, without seeking any recognition or reward. This is a great story of someone who tried to make the year of the Lord's favor a reality in a practical way.

How do we live out this call to proclaim and practice the spirit of Jubilee in our own community right here? I am thankful for the many ministries this church supports locally, nationally and globally. I am also thankful for your care and openness to new possibilities to give and to seek justice. I would like to invite you to a meeting that is taking place right here in our church. Tomorrow morning at 10:00 a.m. there will be a meeting hosted at our church to bring people together from the different social service agencies in our community to talk about the different needs and practices in Genesee County and how we can find new and creative ways to work together to understand and address the needs of our community. If you are interested and able to attend, I hope that you will come to see how the Spirit might guide us to continue to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor in our community.

May we be blessed to always be faithful in proclaiming and living the year of the Lord's favor every day of our lives. Amen.