

Faith Mennonite Church  
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12 Scriptures  
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### **Good news for the poor**

*Isaiah 61:1-4, 8, 10-11; Luke 1:39-55*

Last week we reflected on the Creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2 and the continuity and connection of that story with the beginning of John's gospel telling the story of Jesus... "in the beginning was the Word." The Word that was spoken at creation was the Word made flesh in Jesus.

Our scriptures today are also examples of continuity and connection. When we hear the opening verses of Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of The Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor/oppressed" and to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor/jubilee" we are drawn both backward and forward. The year of jubilee was a concept set forth in the book of Leviticus, part of what was called "The Law." While there are parts of the Levitical code that we find unusual or unnecessarily constraining today, there are others that are amazingly revolutionary, such as the "year of jubilee." Jubilee was a constraint on the concentration of wealth, so that property would be shared in the community. The year of Jubilee was intended to be an every 50-year event, when property lost through debt would be returned to the original families. Thus no one would become generationally disadvantaged.

The setting of Isaiah 61 is not exile, but rather the repatriated community in Jerusalem facing the daunting task of rebuilding the temple and city 50 years after it was sacked by the Babylonia army, when its leaders and many people were taken into captivity. To imagine their situation, just think of the photos we see today from Syria or other wars of the past several decades—beautiful cities such as Sarajevo or Mogadishu left in ruins. We can also think of communities devastated by natural disasters—Joplin, Missouri, and Sendai, Japan. And there are the hidden devastations in our country: a permanent underclass of persons of color who are disenfranchised from housing, voting, employment or any form of public assistance, due to massive incarceration as a result of the "War on Drugs." And the growing problem of homelessness and lack of affordable housing caused by the foreclosure crisis.

Into this situation of despair—of being in ones own land but without a home—the prophet reminds the people of Jubilee, reminds the people that God intends justice. We can imagine that the reminder of Jubilee served a dual purpose: for the poor and those whose only recourse was to begin building from the bottom up one brick, one stone at a time, the word was one of hope and encouragement: God is with us; God is going to lift us up and bring celebration and gladness. And to those who had enough resources to potentially profit from the situation—buying up cheap land or charging high rents, God says, "No!—It's jubilee time, it's sharing time...time to diminish rather than extend the economic disparities in the community."

Looking forward to the beginning of Jesus ministry, Luke records that Jesus recited these very words from Isaiah 61 when he read scripture in the synagogue. He concluded by saying that these words were being fulfilled in that very moment! Glen Stassen, author of *Living the Sermon on the Mount*, which one of our adult classes is studying, shows that Isaiah 61 is also intricately woven throughout the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. In this one text in Isaiah 61, the law (Jubilee), the prophets (hope and justice), and Jesus (God with us) are woven into a single fabric.

Mary's song in Luke certainly is another thread in this same fabric, as it sings the refrain of good news to the poor: the lowly being raised up; the hungry being filled. Mary's song connects to an even older story that predates the passage in Isaiah. Mary's song echoes the song of Hannah, found in the first chapter of 1 Samuel. Hannah, who had conceived in her old age, just as Mary's cousin Elizabeth did, sang her song in thanksgiving even as she gave her young son to serve in the temple. Hannah lived at a time that was described, in the final verse of the book of Judges, as a time "when there was no king in Israel [and] all the people did what was right in their own eyes." It was a violent, precarious time, yet Hannah sang in hope and trust that God would "guard the feet of his faithful ones and judge the ends of the earth." Centuries later, Mary would take up this song, and millennia later, even today, these words still ring courageously in the hearts of all who seek, work, and hope for justice, for God's rule among us.

There are many stories we could tell, of where these songs are reverberating and bringing hope today. Joan Kreider will share one of these this morning, from her recent experience in Bolivia.

Joan Kreider:

I really like this passage of Isaiah 61:1 and 2. In two short verses, one can find an encapsulation of the whole gospel (good news) from the Old Testament through the end of the New Testament. The second verse talks about proclaiming the “acceptable year of the Lord”, which was a reminder of the year of Jubilee introduced in Leviticus 25. The Jubilee was the 50<sup>th</sup> year, after 7 cycles of 7, in which all debts were to be cancelled and all property returned to its original owners. In Luke 4, Jesus chose this passage to announce the beginning of his ministry, and his more fully realized vision of a new ethic of justice. Further, the idea of God’s spirit being on us is echoed in the coming of the Holy Spirit to the new church at Pentecost after Jesus’ death.

These verses tell us very clearly what the content of “God’s good news” is: to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to release captives, to announce the Jubilee, or economic reorganization. This is a topsy-turvy economics, at complete odds with the values of the dominant culture then and now. Mary’s song, too, is an unusual way to respond to an unexpected and likely unwanted pregnancy: she inextricably intertwines economic justice with God dwelling with us. “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things”...

In our comfortable religion, we often think that when God’s spirit is in our hearts, it means that we are transformed into being kind, joyful, and loving. These passages imply that although that may be part of the truth, transformation does not just make us into kinder gentler people. It makes us into people who see the world in an upside down way, radically transformed.

We live in a country that, in spite of the inequities within, is still impossibly richly blessed. I recently traveled to Bolivia, where the gulf between rich and poor is thrown into stark contrast. Bolivia is the poorest country in South America, and is second in poverty only to Haiti in the western hemisphere. A third of its terrain is virtually impassable high Andes Mountains; and a third is the equally impassable Amazon basin rainforest and wetlands. Here a third of people live in places where the only road access is a foot path, and if motorized transport is available, it will be a small motorcycle. Bolivia has a maternal mortality rate of 390 per 100,000 women, and rises to 887 per 100,000 in the most remote parts of the country. That is over 100 times higher than it is in the United States. 5% of babies die at or shortly after birth, and an additional 5% of children die before the age of 5.

So I and a dozen others traveled to Bolivia during Holy Week to participate in a medical conference for nurses and doctors who work with an organization called Mano a Mano (Hand to Hand). The story of this organization starts with the story of one man, José Velasquez, who caught a glimpse of what God’s Good News could look like in the poor country of Bolivia.

José’s parents were subsistence farmers in a small rural village in the mountains of Bolivia; neither spoke Spanish, only the indigenous language Kechua. When the local school closed, they moved their family to the city of Cochabamba so that their six children could have a chance to get an education. José’s father could not get a job, so he began a business making clay roofing tiles. Each morning the children would help with making tiles before going to school. After school, they helped with another business distributing water from a truck. In a country dominated by Catholicism, they were part of an evangelical church.

Twenty five years ago, José had fulfilled his parents’ dream of education; he graduated from medical school and was working in a hospital in Cochabamba as a Pediatrician. And then he had an experience that changed his life forever. A doctor in a remote village was caring for a woman in labor; things were not going well, were not progressing normally. The doctor knew that he would not be able to help her any more. This was in one of the villages accessible only by a narrow path. The doctor got on a motorcycle, the woman clinging behind him. Together they rode 3 hours to get to the hospital. There, doctors could not save her baby, but the mother thankfully survived. José decided that this was not something that should be happening. His faith, coupled with his experience, motivated him to try to do something about the health conditions in Bolivia.

He first enlisted the help of his brother, who was living in Minnesota. They raised funds and in 1994 began gathering surplus medical supplies here for transport to Bolivia. Two years later they decided to try building clinics, and set a goal of building two a year for the next seven years. Each was in a remote area. From the beginning, they used a simple model: the townspeople had to request the project and contribute to it both with their money and helping with the building itself. They finished their first goal of 14 clinics three years early. In 2003 they began building or improving roads, and in 2005 started building schools. In 2006 they began building runways to the most remote locations inaccessible even by roads. As of 2013, they have built 136 clinics, all in continuous operation; 30 school; 45 roads; 20 runways; and now operate 4 small airplanes for medical transport.

In order to better train staff for the clinics, from the beginning they conducted ongoing medical education and training programs. Six years ago, two doctors from St. Paul traveled to Bolivia to talk with the Mano a Mano doctors about what additional education they needed. Since then, every year a group of doctors and nurses from Minnesota go to Bolivia to present a “critical care conference”, with the intent of helping their doctors, dentists and nurses to manage critical patients in the sometimes very challenging circumstances in remote locations. The Bolivian participants choose the lecture topics. This year I had the privilege of joining the group. We had over 300 doctors, nurses, and dentists attend. Eager to learn and expand their skills, they brought good questions to the lectures and break-out practical sessions. I presented a talk on difficult deliveries; one of my areas of focus was postpartum hemorrhage, the leading cause of maternal death worldwide. I was humbled by the excellent work they do with minimal support (unlike the abundance I take for granted—a fully equipped hospital with anesthesiology, operating room ready at a moment’s notice, blood bank, lab and x-ray, ultrasound, functioning emergency transport systems, any number of consultants ready to help if I am stumped—and one of my colleagues always available to help out, only a phone call and a short car ride away).

After the conference came a celebration; Bolivians like to party! When we arrived, we were surprised to be greeted at the door by half a dozen indigenous people dressed in their colorful wide skirts, bowler hats, shawls. In the course of the evening, these people came forward and shared: “We heard that you North Americans were coming and we decided to come too and say thank you for our clinic.” (Even though we had nothing to do with the clinic itself!) They said, “We are so happy for the clinic, and we are happy with our nurse Mary. We also want to say: don’t forget about us. We need a road.” And then they asked all of us to come forward and they placed a Bolivian alpaca hat (chula) on each of our heads, like a blessing and an anointing. Then they left. They had a long journey back to their village in southern Bolivia by the Argentinian/Chilean border: 12 hours by bus, followed by 5 hours in the bed of a pickup truck. As they were leaving, again they said: “Do not forget about us”.

So, that was the story. The spirit of God came upon José, and he started an organization that is caring for the poor. The spirit catches fire in hundreds of dedicated clinic workers, volunteers, and villagers. The spirit came down on our heads that evening in the form of alpaca hats! It just continues to spread—just as in the Bible this theme stretches from Leviticus to Isaiah to Luke to Acts, the story continues and more people have the spirit of the Lord on them. And I am haunted and inspired by those six poor Kechuan people who shared generously and then left with the charge: “Do not forget about us”.