

The life of a biblical prophet was never easy.
 Even Jesus could barely get away with prophecy.
 In Luke, Chapter 4, we read:
*Jesus went to Nazareth,
 where he had been brought up,
 and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue,
 as was his custom.
 And he stood up to read.
 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 preach good news to the poor.
 He has sent me to proclaim
 freedom for the prisoners
 and recovery of sight for the blind,
 to release the oppressed,
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
 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,
 and he began by saying to them,
 "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."
 All spoke well of him and were amazed
 at the gracious words that came from his lips.
 "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked.*
 So far, so good.
 Bolstered by their response,
 Jesus turns more prophetic.
 He affirms that God's plan of salvation
 is for all people, not only for Jews.
 This notion, however, is one step too far.
 Jesus gets booted out of the synagogue.
 Local boy or not, the people pursue him.
 Eluding the crowd just in time, Jesus is spared
 a nasty jump over the cliffs without a bungee cord.
 It's tough being a prophet
 (especially in your hometown).

Today we don't have many prophets around,
 who take the risk of speaking for God.
 Those who do are looked at askance.
 We are suspicious of a preacher who claims:
 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
 The Lord has anointed me and has sent me
 to bring good news to the oppressed."
 It is courageous of Isaiah to proclaim in our lesson:
 "this is the year of the Lord's favor,"
 that is, the Year of Jubilee.
 The exiles in Babylon to whom Isaiah is preaching
 have come to believe
 that God has abandoned them –
 that God has broken a covenant
 that goes all the way back to Abraham.
 For some 50 years,
 the exiles have endured captivity in Babylon.
 All that time, invaders have occupied the homeland,
 Judah and Jerusalem.
 Word has it that it's a very different place now.
 The Temple lies in ruins.
 Other people are living in the towns and villages
 their parents called home.
 Foreigners are farming the land
 their grandparents inherited from their ancestors.
 Among them are the Nabateans,
 residents of the Negeb desert region,
 who are skilled at managing scarce water.
 (By the time of Jesus' birth, the Nabateans
 were known as purveyors of frankincense and myrrh.)
 So the prophet, Isaiah, takes a step too far
 when he pronounces this the Year of Jubilee.
 Isaiah is trying to motivate the people
 to return and reclaim their heritage.
 Jubilee Year? Could it really be possible?
 My first church was in a region where many folks
 lived on ancestral farmland.
 To give them a sense of Jubilee, I posed this analogy:

Suppose your hardworking grandparents suffered a couple of bad years on the farm and had to mortgage the land to survive. Twenty-five years into the debt, they died, leaving the land to your father, along with the mortgage. That year your father married your mother. They leased the fields to a food company and placed a mortgage on the farmhouse to put you and your siblings through school. For twenty-four years, your parents worked factory and office jobs to pay down the debts on the land and house. But the next year the county council, it being the Bible belt and all, reminded everyone, This is the year of the Lord's Jubilee. That being the 50th year of the land mortgage, the title to the fields reverts back to your parents without penalty. The original mortgage is written off. After 49 years of encumbrance, the acreage is theirs, free and clear. That's the sense of Jubilation that Isaiah is announcing to the exiles as they set out to return to Judea after years of captivity in Babylon. Isaiah's message in today's reading is *"The vindication of the Lord is yours. What you had before you left will be yours once more. You shall be called priests of the Lord and ministers of our God."* The historical record does not indicate that the Jubilee Year ever materialized. Certainly the returning of ancestral lands and forgiveness of debts would have worked against the interests of the elite classes.

Returning exiles had to compete for the same parcels of land with the invaders who had occupied them for 50 years. The rebuilding of the nation of Israel did not happen in a single Jubilee Year. For centuries of Israel's history, especially as other powers laid claim to their little swatch of earth, the people held out hope for the time, the *kairos* time, when the land, the nation, and the people would wonder-fully be restored. The Year of Jubilee was code for the eternal hope of national sovereignty. Isaiah 61 is the epitome of that hope: *They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.* In the centuries after Isaiah, before Jesus, this hope came to be expressed in the idea that God will anoint a savior (probably someone from a royal or priestly line) to restore God's will on earth. Another name for anointed savior is Messiah. Fast forward to that synagogue in Nazareth, when Jesus announces the reign of God as his prophetic mission. "Today the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." As Jesus' followers, we believe in the Advent of the Reign of God with God's incarnation. We affirm what Jesus' hometown couldn't accept: God is with us, all people. God Emmanuel. In Mayan communities in Chiapas, the local religious leaders are called *animadores del corazón*, "animators of heart." Their pastoral role among the community is to enlarge hearts, restoring hope and strength. If you spend even a short time

in one of their religious communities,
 you realize how important the heart is.
 The *animadores* don't say,
 "Come in, sit down. How are you?"
 They say, "How big is your heart?"
 As these four weeks of Advent roll along,
 we begin to enlarge our hearts,
 made small by loss, anxiety,
 disappointment, and fear.
 We hear once again the strong promise,
 affirmed by Jesus himself,
 that the Reign of God has begun.
 We trust once again in the New Covenant,
 through which God forgives sins,
 pours out the Holy Spirit upon believers,
 and grants us hearts of obedience.
 We cannot expect an instant Advent "makeover,"
 any more than the exiles could expect Jubilee.
 Building the Kingdom happens in increments,
 some too small to notice. But they do occur.
 Trigger-happy cops, terrorist outrages,
 homophobia, growing old – modern oppressions
 can be eased by even a little change
 in someone else's treatment of us.
 Spirits broken by loss of income, loss of mobility,
 or distance from family can be mended
 by offering love and service to others.
 Captivity, whether to substance abuse,
 identity theft, difficult family relationships,
 or actual imprisonment, is liberated a bit
 when we reclaim our place
 as God's beloved children.
 What we celebrate in Advent is the return of hope.
 With each new reason for hope comes resilience.
 With each increment of resilience
 comes the creativity to build up ancient ruins,
 repair ruined cities, and restore the devastations
 of the past.

In Advent the spirit of the Lord God is upon us
 because the Lord has anointed us in our baptisms.
 Our Reformed faith tradition claims that each of us
 is anointed in baptism to serve as prophet and priest.
 Our Presbyterian Book of Order states:
 The anointing of all baptized persons
 is to the total ministry of the church [G-6.0102].
 Ministry is expressed in various forms –
 some in which the emphasis
 is on proclamation of the Word
 and the celebration of the Sacraments;
 some forms stress deeds of love and mercy;
 some forms are educational, administrative,
 legislative, or judicial;
 some forms are prophetic [G-6.0104].
 Baptisms are perpetual cause for Jubilation.
 We are called as priests and ministers
 to carry out the Reign of God.
 In Advent the spirit of the Lord God is upon us,
 because the Lord is anointing us
 to proclaim the year of the Lord.
 It is not yet time for Jubilation.
 But there are signs of the Spirit of the Lord
 at work, enlarging hearts.
 For example, take our society's growing resilience
 in matters of refugee resettlement.
 Humans seek refuge for numerous reasons,
 but the most common are to escape
 armed conflict, poverty, food insecurity,
 persecution, terrorism, or human rights violations.
 Others seek refuge from the adverse effects of
 climate change, or natural disasters
 (some of which may be linked to climate change).
 Some people are refugees for economic reasons.
 In any case, refugees are unable to find protection,
 care, or stability in their home countries.
 They may pack up in the middle of the night
 and walk, hitchhike, board trains, float on rafts,
 or pay smugglers to get them out of their country.

Many do not make it to a safe location –
 some are returned home, some imprisoned,
 some die from the journey.
 Not all displaced people are refugees.
 The United Nations classifies refugees as individuals
 who have found temporary sanctuary
 or shelter outside their native land
 and are awaiting resettlement in yet a third country.
 The world faces the worst refugee crisis in history,
 due mostly to human factors.
 The estimate of the current number of refugees
 is 22 million worldwide.
 Conditions for refugees are harsh.
 Yet refugees have to be resilient.
 Many refugee families attain independence
 in their final country of refuge.
 By and large, resettlements in the United States
 have been particularly successful.
 The prophesy of Isaiah can ring true for refugees:
*Their descendants shall be known
 among the nations,
 and their offspring among the peoples;
 all who see them shall acknowledge that
 they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.*

In the darkest times, when disaster looms,
 God sends prophets like Isaiah to remind us,
 that when God Is With Us,
 we can rise above the devastations of our lives.
 The Advent of the Reign of God
 comes to us in a thousand little signs.
 To paraphrase theologian Shirley Guthrie,
 the reign of God is seen:
 In the courtesies we show other drivers,
 our friendliness toward checkout clerks,
 our attention to all who serve us,
 whether it's by collecting our garbage
 or taking our orders at restaurants ...
 In the political programs and economic policies
 we support – especially when our positions

threaten our own self-interest
 or the interests of a political, racial,
 or economic group to which we happen to belong ...
 In the way we keep working for change in civic life
 when many say that nothing can be done ...
 In our sadness or outrage at events
 that cause some others to rejoice,
 and in our rejoicing when some others
 are bitterly disappointed ...
 In the way we remain calm
 when some others panic
 and are distressed
 when some others are complacent ...
 And in our indifference to who gets credit
 when the cause of justice, freedom and peace
 is advanced, being just as glad when it happens
 as the result of others' efforts
 as when it happens as the result of our own.

We are the Lord's anointed ones.
 The call to Isaiah is still our call:
 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon us,
 because the LORD has anointed us;
 the Lord has sent us to bring
 good news to the oppressed,
 to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and release to the prisoners;
 and to comfort all who mourn.
 May this be our Year of Jubilee.
 Amen.