Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Third Sunday after Epiphany

January 27, 2019

Neal MacPherson

JUBILEE Isaiah 61:1–4

Luke 4:14–21

Anyone who believes that there is no good news to be

found in the Hebrew Scriptures will have to change their minds once they hear the words of this morning’s reading from the Book of Isaiah. The prophet announces good news of freedom, release, and restoration.

Just a side note—the Book of Isaiah contains the words of three prophets named Isaiah. The first lived when the Assyrian Empire defeated the northern kingdom of Israel around the year 700 BCE. The second Isaiah carried out his ministry among the Jewish exiles who found themselves in Babylon for much of the 6th century BCE. And the third prophet named Isaiah is known as the prophet of the Restoration. This prophet spoke words of hope and promise during the time the Babylonian exiles returned to Palestine and were restored to the city of Jerusalem and their land.

The words we heard this morning belong to the Isaiah of the Restoration and they most assuredly contain good news. The prophet, gifted by the Spirit of God, brings good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.

Those who mourn will be comforted, and they will be-decked with garlands and a mantle of praise. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away. They will be the Lord’s planting. They will be strengthened to build up the ancient ruins, to raise up the former devastations, and repair the ruined cities that were laid waste by the empire that had defeated them.

Good news spoken by the Isaiah of the Restoration, the prophet sent by God to deliver God’s own message to a people once exiled but no longer.

There is a phrase contained in the prophet’s words that is noteworthy— “the year of the Lord’s favor.” This is a clear reference to the year of Jubilee. You will recall that in the Mosaic law recorded in the Book of Leviticus, every fiftieth year was to be observed as a Jubilee year. In that year, all land leases would end and property would be restored to the stewardship of its original owners. Families would be re-united on their own land. Slaves and prisoners would be freed and debts would be forgiven. The land itself would be left fallow and therefore enjoy its own rest and restoration. The goodness and mercy of God would be revealed to all.

Isaiah the prophet invoked this tradition when he spoke of the “year of the Lord’s favor.” It is clear that the Jubilee year was not practiced much in Israel’s history, but it remained a vision of the way human beings should conduct themselves. Isaiah invoked that vision in the words he spoke.

And so did Jesus when he entered the synagogue in Nazareth that Sabbath Day long ago. He opened the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and he reads the words we heard from Isaiah Chapter 61. In reading those words, Jesus, as Isaiah before him, calls on the tradition and spirit of Jubilee, and in fact, he announces that the vision of Jubilee has been fulfilled in the hearing of those who gathered in the synagogue that day.

We like to think that the Old Testament leads to the New Testament, and in truth, there are many Christians, probably a majority of them, who believe that the New Testament surpasses the Old, and that Christianity is a far superior religion than Judaism.

Let’s understand, my friends, that Jesus was thoroughly Jewish. He had no inkling that a new religion would be founded in his name. He sought only to reform the Judaism of his day, and he sought to do this as a Jewish prophet in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem.

His ministry was a ministry of release and restoration. He sought to free the Judaism of his day from a legalism that had become oppressive and excessive. He sought to restore a spirit of compassion to Jewish life. He sought to bring both sinner and outcast back to the Jewish fold. He brought good news to the poor and release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. He proclaimed Jubilee— the year of the Lord’s favor.

This being the ministry of Jesus, I am hard pressed to understand how so many present day Christians can support political leaders who advocate the building of a wall separating us from our southern neighbors, who condone a policy that separates migrant children from their parents, who judge and ostracize those who are of a different sexual orientation, who support the policies of the State of Israel that seek to eliminate Palestinians, including Palestinian Christians, from the Holy Land,