

## A Year of the Lord's Favor

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me as a herald of joy to the humble, to bind up the wounded of heart, to proclaim release to the captives, liberation to the imprisoned; to proclaim a year of the Lord's favor and a day of vindication by our God; to comfort all who mourn – to provide for the mourners in Zion – to give them a turban instead of ashes, the festive ointment instead of mourning, a garment of splendor instead of a drooping spirit. They shall be called terebinths of victory, planted by the LORD for His glory.  
*Isaiah 61:1-3 (JPS Tanakh)*

This passage from Third Isaiah, spoken to inspire the Jewish people during the Babylonian Exile, is the text Jesus chooses to read from the scrolls in the synagogue in Nazareth. He misquotes it, omitting the reference to healing the brokenhearted, and adding a phrase about recovery of sight for the blind, stopping short at the year of the Lord's favor. Although accepting his prophecy without question, even praising His rhetoric, the crowd turns against Him when He suggests that they participate in bringing about the Kingdom of God. Eschatology in first century Galilee implied apocalypse, cataclysm and divine intervention. Jesus proposes another way, involving human agency, a participation in restoring divine justice. His teaching and healing ministry exemplifies His eschatology, which centers on ethical responsibility rather than apocalyptic reversals. Despite His occasional apocalyptic rhetoric, a commonplace of His day, Jesus dies alone on the cross, rather than praying for divine intervention.

The language around eschatology in the Christian Scriptures tends to emphasize the force, retaliation and retribution of the apocalyptic literature that was prevalent in the ancient Near East since the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Combined with the subtexts of dualism – darkness and light – of the Gnostics and Essenes, it points towards the final: 'the year of the Lord's favor' as opposed to 'a year of the Lord's favor'. Yet the Hebrew of Third Isaiah does not necessarily support these interpretations. Because this passage and its recapitulation in Luke's Gospel appear so frequently in the lectionary of **The Book of Common Prayer**, it becomes critical to our

understanding of eschatology. And while our theology of creation certainly colors our doctrine of eschatology, the nature of our end directs the choices we make in our daily lives. If we view the Kingdom of God as apocalyptic and otherworldly, with God as sole agent, we tend to neglect our earthly home, abnegating responsibility for rectifying injustices. Alternatively, if we view God's Kingdom as all of creation, God's Body in essence, we accept personal accountability as co-creators.

My hermeneutic for this passage of Scripture involves comparing various translations: a modern rendering of the Hebrew into English, by the Jewish Publication Society; the King James Version (translated from the Latin Vulgate); the New Revised Standard Version and New International Version, both of which use the Vulgate and the Hebrew as sources. I'll also compare the original Isaiah text with Jesus' quotation of it in Luke's Gospel, as well as examining the context of each passage, both in terms of surrounding Scripture and the historical/social situation it arose from. Finally, I'll discuss the patristic understanding of creation's renewal and divine agency.

This prophecy of a year of the Lord's favor appears at significant seasons, sacraments and feast days, throughout the liturgical year:

The **Feast of the Epiphany**, Years A, B & C: *Isaiah 61:1-6, 9* (Eucharist)  
The **Eve of 1 Epiphany**, Years 1 & 2: *Isaiah 61:1-9* (Daily Office)  
**3 Epiphany**, Year C: *Luke 4:14-21* (Eucharist)  
**Friday in 5 Epiphany**, Year 1: *Isaiah 61:1-9* (Daily Office)  
**Monday in 3 Easter**, Year 1: *Luke 4:14-30* (Daily Office)  
**Sunday in 5 Easter**, Year 2: *Luke 4:16-30* (Daily Office)  
**Thursday in Proper 20**, Year 2: *Luke 4:14-30* (Daily Office)  
**Burial**, Rites I & II: *Isaiah 61:1-3*  
**Confirmation**: *Isaiah 61: 1-9 & Luke 4:16-21*  
**Consecration of a Bishop**: *Isaiah 61:1-8*  
**Feasts of the Holy Spirit**: *Isaiah 61: 1-3* (Eucharist & Daily Office)  
The **Feast of St. Luke**, 18 October: *Luke 4:14-21* (Eucharist)

How do we hear it? A number of differences mark the Jewish and the Christian translations of Isaiah 61:1-3, most notably the distinction between 'a year of the Lord's favor' and 'vindication' in

the JPS and ‘the year of the Lord’s favor’ and ‘vengeance’ in all of the Christian interpretations. Is this an extension of the Sabbath and Jubilee year tradition – a year out of the ordinary time, set aside for restoring the earth and all of its inhabitants to original justice, a vindication of God’s people? Or is it the year of the Lord’s favor towards some, played out in vengeance against others?

Vindication (the JPS version) and vengeance (the KJV, NRSV & NIV versions) derive from the same Latin root – *vindicare*. Vindication implies a defense or justification against denial or censure, freeing from a charge, delivering or absolving from an alleged fault or blame. This meaning leads back to the Hebrew idea of redemption, so that every year of the Lord’s favor restores justice through God’s redeeming of previous injustices. Injured parties receive a reward and a reinstatement when vindication occurs. Vindication functions as part of a cyclical process, in association with the time out of time concept of Sabbath and Jubilee, a *kairos* of sorts. Vengeance, on the other hand, involves punishment, retribution and retaliation, all of which retain connotations of permanence and finality, such that the year of the Lord’s favor exists in human linear time, in *chronos*.

Other indicators in the Christian versions support the concept of apocalypse. The NIV refers to the ‘Lord God’ as the ‘Sovereign Lord’, absolute and unlimited. God clearly corners the market on agency. The prisoners in the NIV are in darkness, a word not found in the Hebrew. The NIV also envisions crowns, instead of turbans, a regal enhancement. Wounded of heart becomes brokenhearted in all of the Christian translations, a distinction between damage (a temporary condition susceptible to human healing, or binding up) and destruction (a permanent condition, requiring divine attention). The humble of the JPS become meek in the KJV and poor in the NIV and NRSV. We move from a sense of earthiness toward patient submission to economic and social injustice, with its concomitant psychological injury. Rather than ‘the year of the Lord’s favor’, the KJV refers to ‘the acceptable year’, consistent with other KJV renderings of favor as acceptable:

Psalm 69:13 and Isaiah 49:8 both connect favorable time with salvation. Paul reiterates in 2 Corinthians 6:2 – ‘now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation’ (KJV) versus ‘now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation’ (NIV).

Isaiah describes a year of favor and a vindication in terms shot through with human agency. Jerusalem and the Temple rise again. Reversal of fortunes occurs. The aliens who once held Israel captive become tenant farmers to the Hebrew landowners, even servants who tend their livestock. There is a catch, though. Israel must worship God in spirit and truth. God rejects perfect liturgy from those whose lives lack justice.

And they shall build the ancient ruins, raise up the desolations of old, and renew the ruined cities, the desolations of many ages. Aliens shall be your plowmen and vinetrimmers; while you shall be called “Priests of the Lord,” and termed “Servants of our God.” You shall enjoy the wealth of nations, and revel in their riches. Because your shame was double – Men cried, “Disgrace is their portion” – Assuredly, they shall have a double share in their land, joy shall be theirs for all time. For I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery with a burnt offering. I will pay them their wages faithfully, and make a covenant with them for all time. Their offspring shall be known among the nations, their descendents in the midst of the peoples. All who see them shall recognize that they are a stock the Lord has blessed. *Isaiah 61:4-9* (JPS *Tanakh*)

Again, the Christian renderings vary the language significantly, replacing desolation (from the Latin *desolatus*, to make lonely), or abandonment, with devastation (from the Latin *devastare*, to lay waste completely), or destruction, and adding foreign shepherds as well as farmers. ‘Servants of our God’ becomes ‘ministers of our God’. Intermediate translation to Latin corrupts the Hebrew intent. The Latin *minister* means servant, deriving from *minor*, or smaller. We understand minister differently, as one elevated. ‘Enjoy the wealth’ and ‘revel in riches’ transforms into ‘feeding on wealth’ and ‘boasting in riches’, revealing a vindictive spirit. The Lord who hates robbery with a burnt offering – a cultic expiation for injustice that avoids any actual restoration of just relationships – translates to hating robbery and iniquity. Inequity, or injustice (deriving from the Latin *in + aequus*, means uneven

or unequal), routinely equates to sin, in the Psalms, the *Torah* and the *Nevi'im*. 'All sin is iniquity' is the Vulgate translation of 1 John 3:4b. The English translations conflate iniquity with transgression of the entire law: 'for sin is the transgression of the law' (KJV) and 'in fact, sin is lawlessness' (NIV). Justice, by its nature particularly connected to charity, is the only one of the virtues in the Hebrew Scriptures that necessarily involves the neighbor. 'Divine wisdom teaches temperance, and prudence, and justice, and courage' (Wisdom 8:7a). Other virtues can be practiced in isolation but justice requires another, just as charity cannot act alone, but only through embodied (not merely intellectual) care for the other.

When Jesus quotes Isaiah in Luke's Gospel, He has been baptized by John in the Jordan River and is on His way home from the 40 days' temptation in the Judean Wilderness. In the *Tanakh*, God anoints prophets, and prophets in turn anoint kings and other prophets. God anointed Isaiah. Jesus, baptized by a local prophet and anointed by the Holy Spirit, sets out to prophesy. His double blessing bestows on Him a measure of credibility otherwise unavailable to an artisan's son. By definition, artisans had lost their ancestral property. Forced to survive through trade alone, with no reliable means of sustenance, they lived marginal lives. As yet in Luke's story, Jesus has performed no miracles. His insertion of healing for the blind into Isaiah's original prophecy creates a litmus test. Immediately he claims, albeit indirectly, that He is the Messiah and that the Kingdom of God has arrived. It is the year of the Lord's favor, in fulfillment of Isaiah's words.

He 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." *Luke 4:16-21* (NIV)

Jesus' omission of healing for the wounded of heart and His addition of healing for the blind reveal interesting possibilities. Clearly, Jesus can read Hebrew. Given the scroll of Isaiah's book, he finds the passage he wants to read without benefit of chapter and verse numbers. He recognizes its distinct pattern of Hebrew consonants, unpointed as yet by the Masoretes. Does He edit the text or is the scroll in this synagogue faulty, altered from the original? Is the healing he promises emotional or physical, literal or spiritual, this worldly or otherworldly? His audience raises no objection to His novel explication. He stops short of vindication/vengeance, never specifying the details of the year of the Lord's favor. This vision carries no trace of reversal of fortunes and no apocalypse. Rather, it represents an enhanced Sabbath year, well within the Jubilee tradition of the patriarchs. Jesus then claims that Isaiah's prophecy is already fulfilled, that His audience is now living in the year of the Lord's favor, surely an anomaly from their point of view. Human beings are responsible, in His mind, for preaching good news to the poor, releasing the captives, freeing the oppressed and healing the injured and ill.

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. Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"

"I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. *Luke 4:22-30* (NIV)

Jesus juxtaposes the lack of faith of Israel with the faith of several outsiders, who acted in times of trouble, receiving the blessing of the Holy Spirit. His words contain a veiled threat. If Israel again fails to heed her prophets, God will spread His salvation elsewhere. The crowd becomes enraged at Jesus' implication that God will not act on their behalf. Is this traditional interpretation the only possible one? Here Jesus challenges His audience to take action. Far easier for an oppressed people to wait and pray for divine intervention, with its implicit apocalypse. Apocalyptic thinking relieves the leaders of responsibility for addressing any injustice. Its passivity encourages radicals to actively assist in bringing about the day of reckoning. The Galilee was a hotbed of ferment in the first century. In this story Jesus defines His camp – neither a passive leader nor an active rebel but an ordinary human agent.

The recent discovery of the Jesus boat in the Sea of Galilee shows just how difficult life had become in Palestine under the Herodian dynasties, as family fishing and agriculture fell under the control of the Roman Empire's expanding and efficient food industry. Originally constructed of good and expensive hard wood, well crafted for seaworthiness, the Jesus boat was clearly repaired over many years with cheaper and flimsier bits and pieces until it was no longer viable. Deliberately sunk in the shallows, its owners considered it less than scrap. The Jezreel Valley, which surrounds the Sea of Galilee, is the breadbasket of Palestine – lush and temperate, in contrast to the Judean Wilderness and the Dead Sea. The pressure exerted on family farms resulted in massive loss of land, servitude and imprisonment for debt, enforced urbanization, starvation and the separation of young women from the protection of the patriarchal household. Apocalyptic thinking intends to comfort the oppressed with a vision of overturning, often in another world since it is impossible for the oppressed to imagine a reversal of fortune in this world's terms. The Beatitudes, preached from a hill above Capernaum, rely on this heavenly orientation. Years of waiting in vain for vindication

typically leads either to acts of despair or a cycle of self-reinforcing inaction. In Luke's Gospel, though, Jesus' eschatological vision centers not on destruction, but instead on a restoration of justice to the marginalized. He both prays and acts. He quotes the prophets in order to re-interpret them in and for His own time and place.

In this passage, Jesus refers to his ministry in Capernaum yet, according to Luke, Jesus' ministry has not yet begun. This is also Luke's first reference to Capernaum (*Kfar Nahum*, the village of Nahum) on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, where the ruins of a large first century synagogue exist. Jesus, however, is preaching in Nazareth, a town of 40 families and perhaps 250 people – men, women and children – in a synagogue on top of a hill, or *tel*. The Hebrew *nazaret* means branch, so Jesus of Nazareth is a reference to the branch, or root, of Jesse. Nazareth is probably not the actual name of the town He lived in. No historical, geographical or literary evidence for such a town exists from the first century, outside of the Gospel texts. For an evangelist as concerned with orderly narrative as Luke, these ambiguities raise several questions. What miracles would His audience have had in mind? Does Jesus deliberately antagonize the crowd to create a sense of urgency? What exactly was the blasphemy that incited them to try to kill Him? Is this entire sequence symbolic – like the town Nazareth – rather than literal?

We hear these readings during the Epiphany and Easter seasons, at celebrations of revelation and resurrection. They appear again in key confessions of our faith and for acceptance of mission – confirmations and consecrations. We commend the souls of our loved ones to God with these texts. The passage in Luke, chosen as the exemplar of his Gospel, is read on his feast day. The resonance of these occasions enhances our understanding of the texts. Joy (Easter and Epiphany) and sorrow (the burial rite) mix with commitment (confirmation, consecration and the Feast of St. Luke) and transformation (Feasts of the Holy Spirit). Significantly, only the first section of the Isaiah passage is

appointed for the Burial Rite and Feasts of the Holy Spirit, while the Epiphany, Confirmation and Feast of St. Luke readings of the Gospel passage omit the reaction of the townsfolk. Their placement in the lectionary insists that we are called to restore God's original justice to creation, through the Holy Spirit's infusion of grace into our human condition. Our unique gifts of preaching, liberating and healing combine with our commitment to God's creation, promising a revelation and resurrection of the divine economy. God works with us, in us and through us, not instead of us. Whenever God works in spite of us, He convicts us of failure to recognize the demands of justice.

The patristic conceptions of the Kingdom of God reflect the real situations of persecuted communities in late antiquity. For Irenaeus, Origen and Augustine, resurrection has critical import. For an incarnational theology subjected to bodily degradation and destruction, only resurrection can redeem it. Irenaeus took bodily resurrection quite literally, carefully ordering the sequence of eschatological events. Out of the chaos of human life an imposed order comforts the suffering: "For the righteous must first rise again at the appearance of God to receive in this created order, then made new, the promise of the inheritance... After this will come the judgment."<sup>1</sup> His vision involves a perfected earth serving the just. Neither corruption nor sin exists, as earth returns to its original pristine condition. Taking embodiment seriously requires that our bodies accompany us in our futures. "Since men are real, they must have a real existence, not passing away into things which are not, but advancing [to a new stage] among things that are."<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus perceives time linearly. Space, for him, cannot alter formally, although its content can be refreshed. Creation must be trustworthy, else God could not be trusted: "Neither the substance nor the essence of the created order vanishes away, for he is true and faithful who established it."<sup>3</sup> History proceeds towards an end that reveals a similar, but open-ended, linear construct.

<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, "New Heavens and a New Earth", in *Readings in Christian Theology*, Hodgson and King, eds., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985, p. 323.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 324.

Origen's idea of the Kingdom of God is one of theosis, where humanity assumes God's nature through imitation: "man received the honor of God's image in the first creation, whereas the perfection of God's likeness was reserved for him at the consummation."<sup>4</sup> Rather than an otherworldly Kingdom, Origen envisions humanity in the continuous process of perfection. The achievement of this state resembles the beatific vision: "the mind will no longer be conscious of anything besides or other than God, but will think God and see God and hold God and God will be the mode and measure of its every movement; and in this way God will be all to it."<sup>5</sup> He agrees with Irenaeus in that no evil, nor desire to do evil, exists when creation returns to its original condition: "the end is renewed after the pattern of the origin and the issue of things made to resemble their beginning".<sup>6</sup> Again, like Irenaeus, he cannot accept creation's destruction: "things which were made by God for the purpose of permanent existence cannot suffer a destruction of their substance."<sup>7</sup> However, his understanding of bodily resurrection remains spiritualized. Death does not destroy the flesh, but rather transforms it. Eschatological existence on the physical level is analogous to current existence, but without corruption. Origen includes all of creation in the beauty, splendor and brightness of the resurrected spiritual body, where there is no longer diversity, but only unity. He parallels his idea of theosis with a divinizing of the body itself: "the nature of this present body of ours may, through the will of God who made it what it is, be developed by its Creator into the quality of that exceedingly refined and pure and splendid body".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Origen, "The Consummation of all Things", in *Readings in Christian Theology*, Hodgson and King, eds., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985, p. 326.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 326.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 327.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 328.

Augustine reiterates Origen's notion of God as all in all: "He will be the consummation of all our desiring – the object of our unending vision, of our unlesening love, of our unwearying praise."<sup>9</sup> In his City of God, the New Jerusalem, we retain our essential natures complete with free will "as ineradicably rooted in rectitude and love as in beatitude".<sup>10</sup> Following Irenaeus in physical resurrection, Augustine imagines ravishing bodies, of "such poise, such grace, such beauty as become a place where nothing unbecoming can be found."<sup>11</sup> Completely at the disposition of the spirit, the body obeys instantaneously. In the heavenly city memory exists, but with its painful affect eliminated. "The memory of our previous miseries will be a matter of purely mental contemplation, with no renewal of any feelings connected with these experiences."<sup>12</sup> Augustine understands heaven as an eternal Sabbath. He divides history into seven ages corresponding to the days of creation and locates himself in the sixth age, indefinite in duration. Unlike previous ages it is not limited by a fixed number of generations. The end of his age ushers in the eschaton, where we "rest and see, see and love, love and praise – for this is to be the end without end of all our living, that kingdom without end, the real goal of our present life."<sup>13</sup> By identifying the eschaton with our *telos*, Augustine implicitly acknowledges our participation in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

Although Irenaeus, Origen and Augustine all describe the Kingdom of God in terms of a renewed creation, they vary in their assignment of agency. Irenaeus assigns all agency to God, while Origen and Augustine share it with humanity. Human agency is always limited to the parameters of divine intention, though. In all cases, the renewed creation functions in radically different ways than the earth we know. Justice is not so much restored as evil (including individuals) is eliminated. All three patristic theologians valorize rest, a state of being.

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine, "The Eternal Happiness of the Saints", in Readings in Christian Theology, Hodgson and King, eds., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985, p. 330.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 330.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 333.

By contrast, modern theologians, such as Bultmann, approach eschatology and agency quite differently. Bultmann sees eschatology as eternally present, having begun with Jesus' incarnation and continuously recapitulating within our individual lives of faith, as well as in the Church's preaching and teaching. Through grace we come to new understandings of ourselves. Our old selves transform when we decide to accept our new lives in Christ. Concomitant with our commitment to Christ comes agency and responsibility. "All responsible decisions are born of love...in unreservedly being for one's neighbor."<sup>14</sup> For Bultmann Christians remain fully within their historical situations but simultaneously exist in the eschaton, just as Christ exists in both history (as immanent and incarnate) and eternity (as transcendent and divine). "For although the advent of Christ is an historical event which happened 'once' in the past, it is, at the same time, an eternal event which occurs again and again in the soul of any Christian in whose soul Christ is born, suffers, dies and is raised up to eternal life."<sup>15</sup> Both outside of time (in the spirit) and subject to time, history and evil (in the flesh), Christians must change their attitudes towards the world.

Building on the insights of both patristic and modern theologians, T.S. Eliot begins his poem 'East Coker', the second in his *Four Quartets*: "In my beginning is my end."<sup>16</sup> He ends it: "In my end is my beginning."<sup>17</sup> More than a resurrection image or a symbol of the cyclical nature of time, he means that the end of one's life patterns itself on one's beginning – eschatology presupposes a particular creation theology. On the other hand, any moment in our personal histories contains all of history. His perception of time, like Bultmann's, recognizes an eternal present, where past and future break in to transform our specific conditions and are reconciled, establishing the

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<sup>14</sup> Bultmann, "Jesus Christ as the Eschatological Event", in *Readings in Christian Theology*, Hodgson and King, eds., Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985, p. 339.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>16</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, London: Faber and Faber, 1944, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Kingdom in chronological time. Eliot understands these *kairos* moments as incarnations of the divine within our human selves, and so we participate in the Kingdom of God, through

a lifetime's death in love,  
Ardour, and selflessness and self-surrender.  
For most of us, there is only the unattended  
Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply  
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music  
While the music lasts.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., "The Dry Salvages", p. 44.

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