

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Third Sunday of Advent

11 December 2005

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

When I was in Washington DC a few years ago for a week long preaching seminar, I heard a sermon about Jubilee Monopoly. The preacher described growing up as the youngest in a family of three. Every Sunday evening, her family and another family got together for supper, and as soon as the meal was over, there would be a parting of the ways. The adults stayed upstairs and did whatever boring things adults do, and the kids would charge downstairs for a game of Jubilee Monopoly. This game worked the same way most Monopoly games work – at least for awhile. All of the players bought and sold as their game pieces allowed, racing against each other for Park Place and Boardwalk, hoping frantically to avoid jail or having to pay ten percent in taxes, coveting the precious get out of jail free card, maneuvering to collect money and avoid spending it, trying to build up their reserves of property and stacks of dollar bills. The way this game was different than the Monopoly that you and I know was that when someone's debts and obligations began to exceed their assets and reserves and their place in the game was in jeopardy, anyone could call out "Jubilee", and all at once the playing field was leveled, the piles of bills were shared until everyone had the same amount, the ownership chips for pieces of property were distributed until everyone's assets matched – and then the game went on. Periodically, one parent or another would stick their head down the stairs, ask how the game was coming and when they might be ready to wrap it up and go home, and someone would answer that it would be awhile, no apparent winner was in sight. And the game would go on.

One of the things you need to know is that these two families had 5 children; each had two sons who were about the same age as the sons in the other family, and then there was one girl, the youngest of the 5, and the preacher of the sermon I heard. She loved these evenings and this game, but it was also always true that she lost. Or would have lost if they hadn't been playing the Jubilee version of the game. The baby in the crowd, the underling, the dumping ground for the cards no one else wanted, she was always the underdog.

Until one night, when everything was going her way. She was as surprised as everyone else, but it's true. She was buying up property left and right. Her pile of bills was growing. The dice were golden in her hands and everything was coming her way. She was sitting on top of the world and having the time of her life. When all of a sudden, she heard this declaration coming from the other side of the table that proclaimed, Jubilee. For a moment, she stared in shocked silence. And then she began to protest. No way! But I'm winning! You can't take all of these pieces away from me. I've never won before! You can't have them; they're mine! I won them fair and square. Why do you think you can just shout Jubilee and take whatever you want of what's mine??! Her oldest brother coaxed and cajoled for awhile, and finally said, come on, share, we'll all have more fun if you do. (Susan Briehl, Festival of Homiletics, May 20, 2004)

Now for that collection of 5 kids, Jubilee was a delightful way to hold their parents at bay and prolong a fun thing way beyond the natural order of the game. But for God, Jubilee is a precious vision, one that God keeps putting out there – as instruction as well as dream. But to date, no one has picked God up on it and put it into action. In the early days of the Hebrew Scriptures, when the laws and practices were being established, God instructed the people to keep a sabbatical year every 7 years, at which time fields were to lie fallow in order to rest, slaves were freed, and debts were cancelled. And then there was a cycle of seven times seven years, or every fifty years, when the Jubilee was to be observed, when not only were slaves to be freed and debts cancelled, but all that was freed was supposed to be returned to its original owner. The sabbatical and Jubilee years were years of God's favor when human misfortune was reversed, and a new beginning was both proclaimed and realized. And all of it reached back to the ancient memory of the people's exodus out of Egypt. Moses said, Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this (Jubilee) command upon you today.

It's striking to me that these instructions, no, these laws were put in place in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy, but by the time of Isaiah, they had never been put into action. To date, the role they had played was to inform Israel that a reversal of fate was both demanded and expected by God. Jubilee was a time of restoration and restitution when the poor would be lifted up and the hungry fed, the captives set free and the oppressed blessed with good news. Jubilee was God's vision and God's intent for how the people should live with each other, and once again, in this morning's lesson from Isaiah, we hear and see the vision. The prophet is given God's Spirit in order to have the voice to proclaim Jubilee. Almost anyone can bring bad news, partly because there is so much of it to bring. It takes spirit to bring good news.

This good news of Jubilee isn't spoken because things have started to turn around for the people of Israel. Or at least, if they have, the people can't identify it yet. True, they've been let out of exile and brought home, but all they found when they got there was dust and ashes. Their homecoming celebration had long since turned to more and deeper layers of grief because they are still struggling under persecution; their community is deeply divided and they can't in their wildest imaginations envision building a future from this rubble and ruin. Into that despair and hopelessness, God's servant walked singing a song of restoration and renewal, release and reunion, promising the building up of ancient and devastated ruins, the repair of destroyed cities and communities. Into that climate of hopelessness and despair, God's servant came singing joy and dancing promise – not because things had turned around, but because God was active in their midst. The second part of the text reverberates with joy: the dusty, frayed clothing of the downtrodden is exchanged for garments of salvation, like a bride and groom wear on their wedding day. When the exiles return home, Zion is a place of unceasing celebration, where the salvation party extends well beyond the neighborhood, to the whole earth, the sea and all its teeming creatures.

This text from Isaiah burst into the world of weary and despairing exiles who had returned to rubble and ruin as a blast of joy and a song of jubilee. And it comes to offer us the very same thing – not because we live in a neat and pretty and just and right world, but because God is present and active and stirring among us to offer more and better and good and right. One preacher writes:

...joy seems almost irreverent in a world where so much is going wrong. Who can be joyful while babies starve and teenagers shoot each other and whole tribes of people try to wipe each other off the face of the earth? It's hard to get jump-up-and-down joyful about any of that. Only joy has never had very much to do with what is going on in the world at the time. That is what makes it different from happiness, or pleasure, or fun. All of those depend on positive conditions – good health, good job, happy family, lots of toys. The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room. (Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Living Pulpit*, October – December, 1996, page 16)

This is the Sunday of Advent when we are bathed in joy, and in God's vision of a jubilee world in which the hungry are fed, the captives are set free, the downtrodden are lifted up, debts are cancelled, dusty, frayed garments are replaced with the clothing of wedding celebrations and war-weary refugees are welcomed by parades for the world-class winning home team. The vision is there, smack dab in front of our noses. We can laugh it off and wait for a more reasonable and realistic vision. We can drum our fingers and tap our toes and wonder when in the world such an impossibility might come to life. Or we can offer ourselves to help make it happen, opening our hands in order to share what we have, declaring peace with those from whom we are estranged, beginning to live the dream that God has planted among us. Maybe it's time for us to declare some Jubilee – whether we're the ones who are winning or who are losing. What can it hurt to share our Boardwalk with the one who has nothing?