

Hitting the Reset Button

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Is. 61:1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
 because the LORD has anointed me;
 he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
 to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and release to the prisoners;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God;
 to comfort all who mourn;
3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
 to give them a garland instead of ashes,
 the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
 the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,
 the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
4 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.

Is. 61:8 For I the LORD love justice,
 I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
 I will faithfully give them their recompense,
 and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
9 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.
10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
 my whole being shall exult in my God;
 for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
 he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
 as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
 so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
 to spring up before all the nations.

HITTING THE RESET BUTTON

What do you do when your computer freezes up and stops working?

You hit the reset button. You turn it off and turn it back on again. It's amazing how many times that simple action will make things right, at least for a while.

It occurs to me that Advent is another way of hitting the reset button.

When things are not going well, Advent gives us the opportunity to look at things in a different way. We get an opportunity to reevaluate our priorities and realign our expectations.

Each year we hit the reset button.

We get a chance to remember that God's story is quite different from the stories we read in the newspaper or hear on the TV. In a season filled with flashy lights and crass commercialism, we hear a voice that promises a hope that endures, a light to shine in our darkness.

In a world filled with fear and war, we hear a voice that promises peace on earth and good will toward all men and women. In a world filled with sadness, we hear a voice that promises comfort and joy.

We need this message. We need it every year.

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

Throughout the Bible in many ways God gave his people an opportunity to hit the reset button. One of the earliest examples of this is found in the book of Leviticus, the 25th chapter.

God told his people that every fiftieth year they were to have a special celebration. It would be called the Year of Jubilee.

This would be an amazing year. It was a kind of social reset button.

Debts would be forgiven.

Captives would be allowed to go free.

Family land that had been acquired would return to the original owners. In this way everyone would keep their portion of the Promised Land.

The Jubilee Year was a way of acknowledging that when too much is controlled by too few; it usually spells disaster for the greater good.

This seemed like good news indeed.

There was only one problem. God's people never tried it.

There is no record of the Jubilee Year actually being celebrated.

But, God celebrated the Jubilee Year.

From time to time God intervened in the lives of His chosen people.

From time to time God made all things new.

From time to time God called His people back home with a word of comfort and joy. God reminded Israel that she had been chosen as a light to the nations, a beacon of hope to the world.

In fact today's lesson is about the Good News that God was once again declaring a Jubilee Year.

The captives would be freed.

Those who mourn would be comforted.

Their nation would be rebuilt from the ruins.

God was going to hit the reset button once again.

Many scholars think that this prophecy is related to the time period just after God's people returned from the Exile.

You'll remember that God's people had languished in exile for almost 50 years.

But, when Cyrus the Persian conquered the Babylonians God's people were allowed to return home.

HOPE IN RUINS

Unfortunately, the Promised Land was not the land they remembered.

The temple had been totally destroyed.

Jerusalem was in ruins.

Enemy nations threatened their existence on all sides.

I can imagine these former captives looking up at the ruins of their former life and asking,

“What in the world are we going to do? How are we going to make it when our life has been totally destroyed?”

When the wind and the fire raged out of control in southern California, I remember a news report about a man who desperately tried to save his home by taking a hose to his roof.

But, eventually the danger was too great, and he had to leave.

When he returned home there was nothing left of his beautiful mountain home. As he wandered among the ashes of his former life he told a reporter,

“This home was our family’s dream. It represented everything we worked for. I don’t know what we are going to do now.”

I think that gives you an idea of how God’s people felt after they returned from the Exile.

They had no money.
They had no home.
They had no hope.

They wandered among the ashes of their former life wondering what in the world they were going to do.

But, God gave them hope.
God lifted them up out of the ashes.

He had already released them from their captivity, and now he was going to help them rebuild their city and their lives.

God was going to hit the reset button for God’s people. And God did.

HITTING THE RESET BUTTON AGAIN

And yet just as it is with computers, hitting the reset button doesn’t fix everything forever.

There will always come another time when the computer screen freezes, and there will always come a time in the history of God's people when hope seems to vanish.

Such a time had come.

The Romans were just the latest invading force to occupy the Promised Land. The political and religious leaders went along to get along.

And the people paid the price.

So, God hit the reset button again.
God declared another Jubilee Year.

Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth and he read the words of Isaiah in the synagogue, some of the same words that we read today. And then Jesus said,

"Today the words have been fulfilled in your hearing."

It's interesting how the people responded to that word. Some said, "That sounds good."

But, others said,
"That sounds just too good to be true.
Jesus was born in this town, and we (like everyone else in this country) have a hard time believing that anything good can come out of Nazareth!"

So, Jesus said,
"It's not just about Nazareth. It's about the whole world. Let me give you some examples from the Scripture."

And then Jesus proceeded to tell some Old Testament stories that apparently the people had forgotten.

He told about a time of famine when God's prophet fed a widow in another country. He told about a time when God's prophet healed an enemy commander.

Jesus said,
"God's kingdom is bigger than you think. It's not just about Nazareth or even Israel. It's about saving the world."

The folks at Nazareth didn't like that sermon.
In fact they even tried to throw Jesus over the nearest cliff!

Sadly, the reaction to God's good news is often the same even today.
We're okay with God saving us and our loved ones and our country.

But, when the word of salvation includes those who live beyond the border we're not so sure.

But, the message of Advent is a message that reaches beyond the borders of our life.

What do we sing? Joy to the world. It is message about a God who loved the *world* so much that he sent his son.

DRESSED FOR HOPE

And the kingdom still comes in those places that are totally ruined.

The kingdom comes to those people who are oppressed.
The kingdom comes to those whose lives are in shambles.
The kingdom comes to those who are held captive.

The kingdom comes to those whose hearts are broken.

God promises to rebuild lives that stand in the middle of the broken dreams and dashed hopes. Of course when you think about it that describes almost all of us doesn't it?

Who among us does not know what it means to have a broken heart?
Who among us does not know the sting of sorrow?

Listen again to the promise of the prophet.

He promises a garland instead of ashes.
He promises the oil of gladness instead of mourning.
He promises the cloak of praise instead of a faint spirit.

God makes it possible for his discouraged people to put on a new way of life. Instead of dressing for a funeral they now are to dress for a wedding.

In verse ten we read that God clothes his people with the garments of salvation.

God covers his people with the robes of righteousness.

It's just like a wedding when the bride puts on jewels and the bridegroom is adorned with a garland.

I don't know about you but sometimes I can feel better just by getting dressed up.

And conversely when people are depressed they see no reason to get dressed up. Their dress mirrors their inner feeling.

The prophet of Advent encourages us to have enough faith to do something, to put on the clothing of faith and work for peace and justice here and now.

We dress as if we are going to wedding even when the circumstances suggest that sackcloth and ashes might be more appropriate.

WAITING AND HOPING

A friend, John Wimberly is the interim editor of the Presbyterian Outlook. In his last editorial he wrote about the Spanish verb *esperar*, which means both waiting and hoping.

John noted that waiting and hoping are both important words during the Advent season, but this particular word had posed an interesting translation problem.

He and his wife were building a second home in Mexico, and the contractor would often tell John that he was "waiting" for construction supplies to arrive.

He would say,

"Senor, estoy esperando ..."

John said that he could understand waiting for construction materials to arrive. But, just hoping for construction materials to arrive seemed a bit too passive for him.

Our work as the community of faith involves both waiting and hoping. We make our plans that we hope will work.

But, we have to wait on the Lord.
We cannot rush to judgment when it comes to God's work.

The kingdom comes, but it is coming according to God's timetable and not according to ours.

God's people would have never rebuilt Jerusalem from the ashes if they did not have hope for the future.

But, they did have hope.
And it was that hope enabled them to take on a building project that would last several generations.

If we have a hope that endures, we too will be able to see beyond the ruins of today to the promise of the New Jerusalem.

And that will enable us to begin building something new today.

UP FROM THE AHSES

The TV cameras returned to the place where the home was destroyed in southern California a year later.

And what did they find?
Did they find ashes and ruins?

No, they found the beginnings of a new home.
The man who had lost everything had found the faith to rebuild from the ashes.

And that's the good news that God brings us this season. Temporary setbacks will not stop the coming of God's kingdom.

When everyone else is donning funeral attire we are called to put on the wedding dress and the tuxedo. We are called to celebrate because we see a new world coming.

We see a time when God is going to reset everything once and for all. And so we strive to make that hope a reality today.

In God's name, we bring release to the captive.

In God's name, we comfort those who mourn.

In God's name, we lift up those whose dreams have turned to ashes.

In other words, we work for peace and justice today because we believe in the coming of our Lord tomorrow.

It is our way of celebrating the season; it's our way of bringing tidings of comfort and joy.

It's Advent, and things aren't working so well in our world.

So, God is helping us hit that reset button yet again.

Amen.