

**3 Epiphany**  
**January 23, 2022**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

What does the Bible tell us about income disparity ... the fact that some company executives make one hundred times as much as the wage-earner working on the assembly line? What does Jesus say ... if he says anything at all ... about how systemic racism and Jim Crow programs like red-lining have adversely affected wealth accumulation ... or the lack thereof ... for Blacks in this country? If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, what are we to do with issues like reparations for the land-grab from Native Americans and First Nation people by European settlers?

Several years ago, John Remington Colt, authored a book titled **Becoming a Millionaire within a Year with No Effort**. I have never even looked at the book ... the reviews are not very good, with lots of people referring to the book as a scam ... I imagine it outlines schemes similar to those proffered in the former president's book, **The Art of the Deal**.

Anyhow, John Remington Colt subsequently paired up with another author, Angus MacFarlane, to write a book titled **Jesus of Nazareth, CEO**. In this book, Colt and MacFarlane re-imagine Jesus of Nazareth as the founder of a huge, global organization and examine his approach to leadership and management. The book ... which, by the way, is no longer even listed on Amazon ... focuses primarily on Jesus' leadership style, his charisma, the way that he held audiences spellbound, his confidence and capacity for accomplishment, his ability to make things happen, his clarity about his beliefs, his motivational skills, and his gifts as an organizer.

While some of these traits may be true as broad descriptions of Jesus' leadership style, it is clear, without a doubt, that the content of Jesus' message would hardly lend itself to goals like "becoming a millionaire within a year with no effort." This is nowhere made more clear than in Jesus' inaugural one-sentence motivational speech in the synagogue at Nazareth, in which he claims that "today" a prophecy has been fulfilled ... a prophecy of a total economic reorganization design, what we might call "God's Jubilee plan."

In today's reading from Luke we hear Jesus' words to his friends and family in his hometown of Nazareth. It has been a while since he traveled to the Jordan and was baptized by John. He has spent forty days in the wilderness with the devil. Now he has returned to Galilee. Luke says that he was "filled with the power of the Spirit" and "he began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone."

Remember, Nazareth was Jesus' hometown ... a village that scholars tell us was probably less than 600 people. So, these were the people Jesus grew up with ... his family of origin and his extended family and friends. Jesus left to make his way in the world, and now he has returned. One can only imagine the expectation of the people in Nazareth as Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath. Invited to read the portion of scripture he read from the Prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)*

Yes, the Spirit has anointed Jesus ... we celebrated that two weeks ago when we observed the Baptism of our Lord and heard the words, "The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove." Now, Jesus gives words to describe the ministry for which he is anointed, using a text from the prophet Isaiah. The Isaiah passage recalls themes from earlier texts in Luke's birth narratives like the Song of Mary, and the Song of Zechariah, but now the message is on Jesus' lips. Unlike Mark, who tell us about Jesus' preaching ... "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God . . ." Luke reports an actual sermon. The sermon itself is very short. I'm sure that there are some here who wish I would keep my sermons as short. But, after Jesus sat down ... the usual position for interpretation and teaching ... he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." That was his sermon ... nine words ... at least that is all that Luke reports. However short it may have been, I doubt that those gathered expected the sermon they received.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled." To announce the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision was a radical, powerful statement. Remember, these people to whom he was preaching knew the story of the Babylonian exile very well ... and they knew of the restoration and renewal that followed upon the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem. It was not just a message of spiritual nurture. It was not just holy sounding words of personal salvation like those heard from many pulpits today. It was a message of radical liberation. These were words inciting justice ... words of care for the real, physical, and social needs of the world. They could not simply be spiritualized. The ministry of Jesus was not only release from bondage to personal sin, but also included freedom from physical, social, and economic forms of bondage for those in the world in which he lived ... and the world in which we live today.

One of the most radical signs of that freedom is Jesus' proclamation of "the year of the Lord's favor." Behind that phrase is the early Jewish community's concept of the year of Jubilee. Described in the Book of Leviticus ... which is one of the five books of the Torah that Ezra read to those who were gathered at the Watergate ... those who were building the Second Temple after their return from exile in Babylon that we heard in our first reading this morning ... the

Jubilee year, or the year of the Lord's favor, was one of the most radical laws of Scripture. Every fiftieth year ... the anniversary of sabbatical year times seven ... was to be a Jubilee year, a year in which all land was returned free to the original owners, and all slaves released. During this year, the land would lie fallow, debts would be canceled, servants would be offered their freedom, and land would be restored to its original owners. The idea of Jubilee is nothing short of a revolution in the way that economic relationships are to be conceived. In particular, the idea of Jubilee undermines the ability of a few to accumulate wealth at the expense of others. Jubilee mandates that every fifty years the entire economic system must begin all over again from scratch.

Can you hear the echoes bouncing off the walls of time? Jubilee is about justice of all sorts. It was about resolving the issue of income inequality. We live in a world where people have been made homeless ... un-housed ... because they could not keep up with their mortgages. These are the very mortgages that the banks sold them ... while the bankers themselves reaped obscene bonuses ... and very few of those bankers ever faced a legal justice system. What if some of that bonus money for these bankers had been used to pay a few mortgage payments while families got back on their feet ... how would that be for justice.

The Biblical law regarding the Jubilee year protected the poor from their two greatest threats: the loss of land which was their livelihood in a subsistence society, and the loss of freedom if they could not pay their debts. Every fifty years, their land would be returned, and if they had been forced into slavery because of debt, they would be freed.

The real problem is that there is no record that the Jubilee year was ever practiced. It was a hope ... a challenge ... to all private ownership rights, and an affirmation that God owns the land, and that God's economy supersedes human economies. But ... as far as we know ... it was always just a hope ... and it was never a reality.

Now, in the presence of his hometown synagogue worshippers, Jesus proclaims that his ministry is like the year of Jubilee, bringing good news to the poor and landless ... freedom to the enslaved and indebted. In this short mission statement, Jesus proclaims that his ministry is both one of justification and one of justice. In Jesus' inaugural message, there are five different recipients of good news ... the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed, and the landless/enslaved ... all represent groups of people excluded by the culture of that time ... people cast aside by society.

This is obviously not a comfortable idea for the status quo ... then or now. Evidently, as we read onward in Luke's Gospel, what is good news for the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed will receive a mixed reception from others. What Jesus is saying is that this proclamation, and the faithful living out of God's Word, is something not to be postponed until tomorrow, but is something requiring our most urgent response today.

According to God's Jubilee plan, many of the goals of productivity and capital gain have to be checked at the door. God's Jubilee plan requires that the land be permitted to rest, that we live

in support of the environment so that it might support us. God's Jubilee plan mandates that the wealthy forgive debts that are owed in order to provide a fresh start for those for whom the burden of debt has become debilitating. God's Jubilee plan requires that the system of exchange that has become a prison-house of debt, envy, and greed loosen its grip on the lives of each one of us so that we might be freed up to discover relationships that are not defined and motivated primarily by the need for monetary gain or success.

God's Jubilee plan encourages the limitation of growth, earning, accumulation, and speculation. At the same time, God's Jubilee plan persuades us to take the limits off of literacy, education, and the provision of basic economic needs such as life, liberty, health care, housing, and food. Now I know that all this may sound like a stump speech for Joe Biden's Build Back Better plan, but just because he is President doesn't mean he might be the new Messiah. I believe that this economic and social plan for which Jesus would be the CEO cannot be contained within any political, economic, or social system or ideology.

Although the idea of a Jubilee Year may sound like bad news to some ... and indeed it did to many to whom Jesus proclaimed it on that day in the synagogue ... it is, in fact, unflinchingly good news for a world that is seeking a way toward a sustainable and livable future for all. More and more in today's world God's Jubilee is looking less like an impractical ideal and more like good common sense, a practical pathway toward repairing the fabric of human relationship on local, national, and global scales. Jesus, "CEO," just may be to us presenting a workable solution, rooted in ancient laws and traditions, to problems that often feel overwhelming.

According to Luke the people listening to Jesus were "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Perhaps it is time to listen and to respond like those in Nazareth did that day, "amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" and then act as if Jubilee might be a hope that can be realized in our world.

May we hear the sermon that Jesus preached to his hometown synagogue as alive today as it was two thousand years ago. Unfortunately, although the sermon was first received with "amazement," the congregation's feeling quickly turned to rage, and they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff. We will hear that story next week. But we have to realize that the powers-that-be are powerful. They do not want the status quo to be upset. But if we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then this mission statement of practicing Jubilee ... although it comes with a cost ... is a primary piece of our faith.

Amen.