

When I was a boy not that long ago, I would often get bullied. I didn't have many friends in elementary school and kept mostly to myself save for one or two really close friends that I spent time with consistently. My best friend at the time was ironically not the best of friends, but it's hard as a young person to decipher these things. The "not-the-best-friend", we'll call him James, was my neighbour and we spent time together almost every day. We would play outside on the block, riding our bikes, going to the park across the way, or playing games in each other's basements. James was a good friend one on one. We hardly fought, and when we did fight, it was because of silly things that we would forget about the next day.

That began changing as I got older. There was a boy down the block that James was friends with, his name was Mark. Mark was a stout little boy, with big ambitions to overthrow my friendship with James. Whenever James and I would play together, Mark would come running from down the street. He would intentionally drive a wedge between my friendship with James in any way that he could. Mock me, deride me; just be a mean 8-year-old kid.

James never took my side. He never stood up for me, in the ways I would have stood up for him. Mark would begin the onslaught and James would either ignore it, or even join in. It made playing together tedious and upsetting much of the time. I intentionally avoided Mark more and more frequently, which could mean turning down playing with James. I began noticing this was a common theme with James. Whenever we were with other people and they mocked me, he wouldn't do anything. He would join or do nothing at all.

Down the block, two young brothers moved in. They were best friends with Mark. Now Mark had a team. His two best friends from school, James, and then there was the tag-along, me. There was one day where Mark and the brothers had ganged up on me. I don't remember how it began but what I do know is that Mark siced the brothers on me, and they were chasing me down the block. I was running for my garage and they were probably 30 feet behind. I ran into my garage, and quickly pressed the door. It began closing. The brothers pulled up onto the driveway, jumped off their bikes and came for the garage which was now closing. It was almost all the way down when one of them tried to jump under the door, the youngest brother specifically. Not being the most intelligent person in the world, he almost made it under, but his head got pinned in the door. So, the heavy

wooden garage door was crunching his head into the concrete, and because it was an old garage door, the sensors didn't work. The door just came to rest on his head. I was already inside the house at the time, when we heard a bloodcurdling scream coming from our garage. My dad was very confused. Loud wraps on the door ensued with the oldest brother explaining the situation at the front door. My dad jumped into the garage and opened the door. The young boy with two big red lines slotted in his head ran home crying. He was okay, and it wasn't long before his mother showed up at my front door and was demanding an explanation from me about what occurred. After I explained what happened, and she obviously thought it was just 'in play', my dad sent me up to my room after telling me I was grounded. I was crying waiting for my dad to come upstairs. He did eventually, and he explained to me that if I had done what I did on purpose, it was wrong. Then my father said I wasn't grounded, and he only did it because the young brother's mother was furious, and he couldn't exactly be sure what occurred. I remember just being so relieved that I wasn't grounded that I didn't even consider the injustice against me, or that my character was being slighted. Events like these happened on and off for years until I stopped spending time with James. I went to a different school, attended church for the first time, forged new friendships, and the friendships I had from my youth became a memory.

However, the pain that was inflicted in those times, did not fade so easily. Even as I was writing this I said to my wife, "Man those kids were brutal." I'm thankful to God that even though I didn't know Jesus, or care about Him, He was watching over me in those times. He was protecting my spirit and my will, and He was even protecting the little brother who thought he could fit under a garage door. Christ gave me great joy in my life and I still look very fondly on my childhood. It wasn't all bad. It's just that often the bad can stand out from the good.

God feels the same way about His people Israel, in the Old Testament. God loves His people Israel, and He cherishes them; much like I cared for and cherished my friend James. But Israel began spending time with other people, other gods, and they forgot the Lord their God. They forgot what Yahweh had done for them, and from one generation to the next, Yahweh became a distant memory. They made a mockery of themselves, and swore allegiance to other nations, just as Pastor Tom explained last week when they teamed up with Assyria when God was beside them all along. Israel would wander back to Yahweh when they needed Him, or when He imposed His great will upon His people. They would suddenly see their need for their true Saviour and true friend. I'm sure many of us can sympathize with this story. We have friends, or family, who take advantage of us, and

our kindness. They are fairweather people. They are there for the good times, and when things start to turn for them or become inconvenient, they leave. This was a playing part in the end of my friendship with James. God feels the same way about His remnant people however, difference for God is His unending love. He does not end his friendship with Israel post haste. He does not walk away even though they have forsaken Him. He reminds them of what he has done for them. God does not let His people down. He does not bully them into submission. He waits for them with an outstretched arm. This is God's story of redemption in the Old Testament.

We often look to the New Testament for our understanding of God's unending grace, His merciful love, and enduring passion for His people through the personhood of Christ. But it is also present here, in the Old Testament too. Our text today communicates this main idea very clearly; **Our God is a God of second chances.** In fact, the latter half of the book of Isaiah displays this theme. I say latter half because Isaiah is split up into two distinct parts. The first part, coming from Isaiah Chapters 1 through 39, is about warnings of judgement and promises of subsequent restoration for Jerusalem, Judah and all nations. The second part, coming from Isaiah Chapters 40 through 66, is about a judgement which has already taken place, and now a time for restoration between God and man. This second section is where our text originates. Before we delve into the text though, let's get some context.

Who was Isaiah, son of Amoz, of the Kingdom of Judah? Unfortunately, we do not have much about the man himself. Isaiah was a prophet, living in late 7th century BC. He lived until the 14th year of the reign of King Hezekiah, in the early 6th century BC. He was witness to the very end of the reign of King Uzziah, and his prophesies are believed to have been recorded over a period of 64 years. At this time, Assyria was expanding their territory and Israel was in a rapid state of decline. The Assyrian empire was sweeping westward through Canaan and Syria. Isaiah details the failure of King Ahaz trying to align himself with Assyria, as well as the success of King Hezekiah in restoring the safety of Judah by sending back the Assyrians who threatened the region itself. This restoration was only possible through Hezekiah's great pleas to God through prayer and petition.

Now we know what was happening in Israel and why Isaiah was preaching; he was God's mouthpiece to the wayward kings and people. Isaiah was a mighty prophet in this way, and it's because of the book of Isaiah that we have some of the most important Messianic prophecies which were fulfilled through Christ. I am here to

discuss a turning point in Isaiah, and what that turning point means for us. Let's explore this turning point together.

Turn to Isaiah 61, I'll be reading from the ESV. The passage is on the backside of your bulletin if you'd like to follow along, or it is on page ____ of the Bibles in your pew-backs.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
 because the Lord has anointed me
 to bring good news to the poor;
 he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and the opening of the prison to those who are bound
 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God;
 to comfort all who mourn;
 to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
 to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
 the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
 the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
 that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
 the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

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.

Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks;
 foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;
 but you shall be called the priests of the Lord;
 they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
 you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
 and in their glory you shall boast.

Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion;
 instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot;
 therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion;

they shall have everlasting joy.
 For I the Lord love justice;
 I hate robbery and wrong;
 I will faithfully give them their recompense,
 and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
 Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
 and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
 all who see them shall acknowledge them,
 that they are an offspring the Lord has blessed.
 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
 my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
 and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
 and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
 so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
 to sprout up before all the nations.

The title of my sermon today is “The Year of the Lord’s Favour”, from verse 2, which coincides with the title of this passage in many of your Bibles (added by our modern scholars). It has a deep and rich meaning. Isaiah is proclaiming the Year of the Lord’s Favour. What is the year of the Lord’s Favour? In order to understand the meaning of this, we must understand the Sabbath year. Every seven years in the Jewish tradition, the soil in the growing fields was to be left without cultivation. This increased its yield greatly in the coming years as it restored nutrients to the ground. After seven sets of this Sabbath year, at the end of the 49th year, or the beginning of the 49th year, depending on which scholar you ask, there began what is called the Year of the Lord’s Favour, also known as The Year of Jubilee. During the Year of the Lord’s Favour, all property is returned to the person from whom it was bought, or their heirs if the person has passed away. As well, every person living under slavery to other Jewish clans were to be freely returned to his or her birth clan. There were very specific parameters given for these redistributions, and this all originates from sections of Leviticus Chapter 25. A key point that we often miss here; commonly, Christians have come to understand that the Year of the Lord’s Favour means an

elimination of all debt, however this is not the case. This passage does not advocate for that, however what it does indicate is this; “What is owed is returned in full.” God is giving us, His faithful remnant, a Year of His Favour. It’s a reminder that the Year of Jubilee is also for us, living in the 21st century. So how does this apply to a 21st century Christian? It is that we are entering a time when God is lavishing things upon us. We are not the landowners in this case, of whom God owes the land to. God doesn’t owe us anything. We are slaves, we are the bondservants returning to our native tribe. We were once estranged from our Heavenly Father; we sold ourselves into slavery to sin, and now God is bringing us back home in glory. God is taking this time to comfort all who mourn; that’s from **vs. 1**; to give gladness instead of mourning, **vs. 3**; to give joy and praise instead of despair, and to bring them up to righteousness. He is bringing back the people who were lost, **vs. 4**; He is restoring us to honour rather than our shame, **vs. 7**. A double portion; a ***year of a double yield of crops***, and everlasting joy together with it.

Isaiah doesn’t just prophesy about the Year of the Lord’s Favour, he directly contrasts this with *the day of vengeance of our God*. This is commonly known to us as **Judgement Day**, the day when God will judge the people of the earth. Isaiah pictures this day in Isaiah 63:1-6. God is as merciful as He is just. On one end of the scale we have this outpouring of His unending kindness and favour, and on the other end we have His judgement. We have been given a choice in this life. We can receive the limitless favour and mercy of our God, or we can receive the judgement due for sinners. Even though we have all sinned here, and fall short of the glory of God, He has given us an opportunity for redemption through His son. He has given us the Year of the Lord’s Favour, all while we deserved the Day of Judgement. On the day of judgement, Isaiah says people will say; “Who is this (*added by me*), he who is splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? And God will say, “It is I, speaking in righteousness, *mighty to save*.”

It is I, says the Lord. Mighty to save. Even in His time of repayment, He is mighty to save. His will for mankind has not changed. His ultimate desire through both Favour and Judgement is salvation for mankind.

So, why is God doing this for us? Why is He lavishing all these gifts upon us? Isaiah answers that question in **verse 8**, “For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully give them recompense and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their children, and their children’s children will be known everywhere. They are **my** children, says the Lord. They are **MY** children, says the *Lord*.”

God has made, and is continually maintaining, an everlasting covenant with us. He promised it to us through Abraham and reaffirmed it many times, as we see here in Isaiah 61. This covenant was created by Him and sealed by the death of His Son on the cross for us. Fast forward 700 years to the Gospel of Luke, in chapter 4. Jesus is returning from his 40-day temptation in the wilderness. He has made it through the test and begins His ministry in His home region. He is preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth of Galilee. He has unrolled the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and He reads from this passage in Luke Chapter 4 verse 18-21; “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Christ was sealing the Year of the Lord’s Favour which was prophesied by Isaiah many years before. These things that Isaiah was empowered to say, in one way, was God bringing a physical deliverance on earth, but also was bringing about a spiritual deliverance by Christ later on. You see even though Israel continued to forsake the Lord consistently after this prophecy, rejecting Him for other gods and adulterating Him, because of His promises, Israel still was able to experience the Year of His Favour in the times they remained faithful to Him. On the other side of that prophesy for us now, Christ’s deliverance is a deliverance that lasts eternity. When he brings joy, it is a joy that never ends; when He gives faithfully to His remnant, the recompense never ends. It is a covenant without end

All of this sounds good, doesn’t it? Things like setting the captives free; things like ‘comfort to those who mourn’. These are things we hear often from the New Testament epistles like Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, “[...] the Father of mercies and God *of all comfort*, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction.” (1 Cor. 1:3-4). We sing songs about this, calling Him things like Way-Maker or Chain-Breaker.

But, maybe He doesn’t feel like a “Way-Maker” or a “Chain-Breaker” in your life right now. Maybe this past year has been the toughest year of your life. A job that has been so secure in your life is now lost, and you’re struggling to find your purpose and a new career. Maybe you’ve lost a loved one this past year, and this

Christmas was the first time you spent without them. I know I felt that acutely with the loss of my grandmother. Maybe school is crushing you, or you have problems with anxiety. There are a host of problems that could be cropping up in your life and you still come to church with your Sunday best, ready to tell everyone around you that you're "busy" and "doing alright" when they ask. Maybe you're getting bullied like I was, and the people who you believe are your friends turn out to let you down. Your closest allies allow bad things to happen to you, and they don't stand up for justice or mercy, and they don't bring you comfort or peace but instead they bring turmoil and resentment.

If this is you today, there is a great message of hope from Isaiah 61. God is not one to sit idly by as His people are forsaken. We may even turn our back on God. We may reject His love and kindness for our lives. We may despise Him. But He does not forget His covenant with mankind. He is not like man, who become easily frustrated and leaves; even when it's their right, like my old friend James in my life. He does not forget His love and mercy for us. He reaches out to restore us. He is always seeking restoration between His children and Himself. He has been doing it since the covenant was promised.

With the beginning of a new year, and a new decade, dawning on us, there is a moment of reflection. We are entering into the third year of our Vision 2025 initiative; to reach unsaved people in every walk of life. Are we reminding ourselves of the Year of the Lord's Favour? Are we meditating on the sacrifice of Christ and what joy awaits us because we are part of His covenant? If we aren't, we should change our gaze and focus it on the One who is Mighty to Save, the Author of Salvation. God made a promise to us through His prophet Isaiah over two and a half millennia ago. Instead of making a New Years resolution that you'll keep up for two weeks, make one that you can keep for the rest of your life; focusing on our gratitude of the Lord and making a difference in the lives of the people around you. The year of the Lord's Favour is never ending.

I challenge all of us, but specifically those who are struggling in this season to pray through Isaiah 61. God, this is who Your prophet says you are; a comforter. A healer. A liberator. A glorifier. A rebuildier. One who gives a double portion. One who gives everlasting joy. Reveal this to us today God. Reveal Yourself to those who are questioning You and are going through this season hurt and ashamed. Broken, and mistreated. Be their comfort. Be their justice in this time.

Let's pray together now,

God you are a Way-Maker. You are a Chain-Breaker. You keep your covenant promises forever. You have maintained them through time. I pray you continue to do this. For those who are lost and mourning among us today, be their strong tower. Be their shield and salvation. You are a God of second chances. You are a God who redeems and restores. Amen