



---

## The Year of Jubilee

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church*

*Luke 4:14-21, January 23, 2022*

Today after this service we are having our Annual Meeting over zoom, which is a time both to look backwards at the previous year, and also to look forward at the year to come. I truly hope that every one of you will come to the meeting. In it we will be doing some visioning exercises. We will imagine what a vital faith community would be like that truly nourishes and excites us, in which we see clear evidence of God at work because we are aligned with our highest values and our true purpose, following Jesus' Way of Love. But to have a true vision of the future, we need to know what it is about who we are and have been that is most important. We are called to dig deep to the bedrock of our scriptures and tradition to find where it all began, when it was fresh and powerful and alive, in a way that speaks to us today.

It might sound odd, but I think that's exactly what Jesus was doing in today's gospel reading. We forget that he was just like us, a person raised in a longstanding religious tradition who went to worship every week, who studied scripture. He even signed up to be a reader in the service. And we don't know how he saw the religion of his day, not really, not at this point. What we do know is that he probably was not satisfied with how it was interpreted and lived, because his teaching was so different.

I was speaking with a friend this week, another priest from the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, who described something she called existential emptiness. She said that condition is like standing in front of the fridge wanting something, opening the door, and not seeing anything in there that looks good. So then you think of calling a friend, but that doesn't feel right either. You know you need and want something, but nothing in the world around you seems to touch that place. We've all felt this way at times, including about church. I don't know if that was how Jesus felt when he looked at how his synagogue operated, but in today's story, when he opened the scriptures, he found the place in the prophet Isaiah that did speak to him, powerfully. It was about the Spirit of God anointing him to bring good news to the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, to let the oppressed to free, to proclaim the year of God's favor. And maybe he couldn't even describe why that spoke to him so powerfully, not just yet. But he knew that that scripture was meant to be about right here, and right now. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he said. They were meant not just to believe in but to experience liberation, good news and healing in their actual lives.

This liberation, good news and healing is expressed in the overarching mission of the church to love God, our neighbors and ourselves. What does love really mean to you? For me today, I understand love to mean seeing the sacred light of all beings including ourselves, and learning to embody that divine light as Jesus did, whose love makes that possible. Not only are all sacred, but we are all profoundly interconnected. From that place of profound connection we see that no one can flourish until all can flourish, and so we will not rest until all captives are freed, all oppressed are released. In the words of John Philip Newell, we are called to cultivate a sacred imagination "to help us remember the curve of oneness from which we have come. This will strengthen us in the sacred work of seeking true relationship with one another and the earth."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> John Philip Newell, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul* (Harper One, 2021) at 145.

Newer St. John's member Tabitha Kyambadde shared with me a story about an anthropologist who proposed a game to African tribal children. He placed a basket of sweets near a tree and had the children stand 100 meters away. He said whoever reached the basket first would get all the sweets. So what do you think they did? The children held hands and ran together toward the tree, divided the sweets equally and enjoyed them. When the anthropologist asked them why they did so, they answered, "Ubuntu" – which meant, how can one be happy when the others are sad? It also means, "I am because we are." This reality, *ubuntu*, doesn't come from an intellectual concept but from the experience of the heart in relationship with others. In the Lakota tradition, they say *mitakuye o'yasin*, which means "for all my relatives"—including our sisters the crickets and our brother sun and the mosquito nation and all people everywhere.

So this sense of divine light and relationship, connection, is the deepest place from which we begin. As many of you know, after the murder of George Floyd and a long period of learning and discernment, St. John's felt the Spirit was calling us to center the work of racial justice and healing at our church. But the thing we are centering at St John's is greater and larger than that, although it does include racial justice. We are centering an embodied, nondual, relational love that liberates and heals ourselves and the world. This is about seeing the *ubuntu*, the Beloved Community, the love of God, neighbor and ourselves that we are made for. This includes racism, but it also includes healing the earth, healing our relationship with ourselves and one another. It is about healing from blindness, and recognizing the ways we have imprisoned parts of others and ourselves that we deemed unworthy or unsafe.

As I mentioned before, the sense of existential emptiness is everywhere in our culture. What are you hungry for? Can you describe it? People in all kinds of institutions are looking at things as they are now structured and saying, I'm not sure I want any of this. This is true of the church as well. As you will hear in the annual meeting that is coming next, St. John's like so many other churches is shrinking a bit. We have fewer members, and although those who remain are strongly engaged and even more generous than ever, our expenses are rising. We don't know how much of this was about the pandemic or how much of it is permanent. But we have a choice and a chance, as national Episcopal Church priest Stephanie Spellers says. We can choose to be a people who want to throw all our eggs into the basket of what really matters. To find that which we are truly hungry for and then spend our energy and attention there. I know what I am hungry for and what nourishes me. It is to have true community and real guidance, including inner guidance, that I need to embody divine light. I am nourished when I am in alignment with my own deepest self where God dwells, and when I am seeking true, heart-centered relationship with all others. When I let that connectedness impact how I spend my time and how I play my part in healing the systems that deny BIPOC people and the earth the chance to thrive. At St. John's, we are seeking to have our worship and study and programs and service all act from and move toward this place. In short, to walk Jesus' Way of Love.

To do this we can take the risk to admit where we ourselves need what Jesus was describing in today's scripture. We do need liberation and healing in order to embody divine light in all that we are and do and say. If I were to ask you what you need liberation or healing from, how would you answer that? Are there areas in your life in which you have been stuck? Do you sometimes feel trapped or unable to do anything about things that matter greatly to you? What if there could be healing and freedom about these things?

We are not alone. There is a worldwide awakening of people all over the place who are trying to find that which really nourishes them. For example, there is a network of churches who call themselves Wild Churches who primarily worship outdoors, who insist we are part of the earth, not master of it, and who seek the inseparable healing of all creation including humanity. There has been the Healing Prayer Tents in North Minneapolis that have now morphed into a monthly zoom “Come Together” of BIPOC leaders who are inviting white neighbors into change and healing and doing our work. There is the indigenous wisdom of both Native American and Celtic Christians who teach us that what is deepest in us, what we know in our hearts, is true even if we need healing to see it. Right in front of us is an unbroken thread of wise teachers within Christianity and outside of it, who discovered divine light in themselves and in other beings and shared it. It is everywhere.

This is the journey we are on. We are recovering the wisdom that exists at the heart of our faith; moving from duality to unity; and embodying divine light through following a radically expansive Way of Love that expresses itself right here, right now.

Jesus describes the “year of God’s favor” in today’s scripture. That is a reference to the ancient Jewish practice of jubilee, the year in which the land laid fallow, they did not plant anything to give the earth itself the chance to rest, and a year in which debts were forgiven. It was a year to reset and renew themselves. Let’s allow this year at St. John’s to be a year of Jubilee. A year to connect with that which is most important. At this time of transition and crossroads, St. John’s has the opportunity to recognize and choose what our unique identity is about. We can look at what our creative embodiment of divine light has been, is now, and will be in the future. There is this thing greater than the sum of our parts, this entity called St John’s. Can you feel it?

I hope you will all come to the zoom Annual Meeting that follows this service, at 11am. In that annual meeting you will hear more about the current state of St. John's, and we will also all participate in a visioning exercise in which we engage in sacred imagination together about our future as a parish. It is a future that is bright, and uncertain. It is very possible that we will have to change in years ahead to align our mission, structures and resources. But this is the chance for us, like Jesus, to regain our vision, to be liberated from all that holds us captive, and to step forward into a future that includes God's favor, good news, and working for a world in which all can flourish. Amen.