



Day 9: Empower Us to Act

Isaiah 61:1–4

¹The 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; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to 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. ⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Who is addressed?

Biblical scholars as well as communities of faith have re-discovered God's preferential solidarity and identification with the poor. The many laws and ordinances in Scripture that provide for the poor and the destitute indicate God's concern for the weak. God cares for the poor, sides with the oppressed and expects the community to do likewise. The prophetic writings emphasize the collective responsibility for either the disintegration and destruction or the promotion of the community's life.¹ The wholeness of life can be perceived and realized only as life in community.

This text speaks to the privileged **and** to the oppressed. Both are in a state of paralysis, which hinders them from carrying out God's commission. Each group has its own reasons for not doing so. The privileged are hesitant to carry this out because it shakes up the status quo, while the oppressed feel powerless to do anything, having grown accustomed to a culture of receiving. Hence, the system of domination and subjugation is self-perpetuating. A countervailing system is needed that builds upon mutual respect, care and equity.

The first person account in Isaiah 61:1–3 provides a dim glimpse of the prophet popularly known as Third Isaiah. This passage is frequently used to characterize the prophet and his vocation. Because this passage has many themes found in Second Isaiah (*cf.* Isa 42) this perhaps is not from an identifiable prophet.

What sort of a prophet is he who merely echoes the thought of an earlier prophetic figure? It should be apparent that we are not witnessing a new outpouring of the classical prophetic spirit here, but rather the studied reiteration of an earlier prophet's message.²

What is important is how these recurring words from Second Isaiah function in the new context of the program of restoration in Isaiah 60:62. Isaiah 61:2–4 contains the commission of the prophet. This lends authority to the program of restoration by relating it unmistakably to the commission of the servant of Second Isaiah.

In the original context, the speaker was an individual, probably a spokesperson (the prophet?) on behalf of the community (*cf.* Isa 49:3). But in its new setting, this prophetic heritage is adapted by the community. The prophet's office is now collectively interpreted, as an intermediary between Yahweh and the covenant community. To the impoverished, the blind, the mourning, the imprisoned and brokenhearted, the message was one of imminent healing and salvation.

What kind of community is more likely to respond to this kind of message?

The text points to a context of suffering and pain. The setting is post-exilic Jerusalem. The exiles had returned to their homeland where they worked and contributed to rebuilding the community. Some of them, however, were apparently being deprived of enjoying the fruits of their labor. The speaker/s in the passage are, therefore, the have-nots, who are weary of the pragmatic claims of the priestly aristocracy who are mostly in control (*cf.* verses 6ff.).³

The speaker appears to be a member of a small community, an oppressed and outcast group with no power, status, or access to decision making in the larger community. This minority, however, saw itself as the real Israel, the righteous, chosen and the true servants of Yahweh. Hence, it was under active attack from adversaries of the larger community who did not consider them to be a part of the covenant community.⁴

The outpouring of the Spirit

This prophetic servant community claims no power in and of itself. In its post-exilic situation, it has no worldly power. Its power comes solely from the all-powerful spirit of Yahweh that rests upon it. The Hebrew word for spirit (*ruach*) carries the idea of power or vitality. It covers a whole range of physical, emotional, temperamental and volitional behavior. The temperament or disposition of a person was a reflection of his or her spirit. The Hebrews believed and prayed that God would put a new and right spirit in them (Ps 51:10). Worshipers longed for God's Spirit to abide in them forever so that they might think and act as God disposes.

This fresh outpouring of the Spirit leads to reaffirming and reapplying the words of the earlier prophecy. The individual office of the prophet develops into a collective office. The community as a body claims to carry on the office of the servant of Yahweh.

The sending

The God who delivers can disrupt social bondage and exploitation, overthrow ruthless orderings of public life, and authorize freedom, dignity and justice. The verbs refuse to accept any circumstance of oppression as a given. The Spirit works to send the community forth on a six-fold task.⁵

- **“To bring good news to the oppressed”:** The servant community is sent to announce good tidings to the struggling community of Judah. The “oppressed” include the broken hearted, the blind, etc, as well as individuals who are economically, politically and socially subjugated. While all the other

categories mentioned below experience liberation or healing in some tangible way, the oppressed are given what seems to be only the “good news.” This “good news” empowers the community to be conscious of their exploitation and to counteract it. It provokes resistance to exploitation and the discovery of strategies to overcome it.

- **“To bind up the brokenhearted”:** There will be healing for those who are brokenhearted for whatever reason.
- **“To proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners”:** Freedom is not only for those who are literally captive, but also for those who are figuratively captive to any form of domination and subjugation. The oppressed are responsible for working toward their own liberation.
- **“To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God”:** The dawn of Yahweh's favor means good news for the poor who have unjustly been kept from rightfully sharing in the bounties of God's blessings. This is an allusion to the year of Jubilee. Whether it was practiced or not, it is seen as the culminating assertion of the God of Sinai (Ex 23), who intends a very different arrangement of economic wealth and social power. In short, a new era is dawning in which Yahweh's judgment on the people will be turned aside. Yahweh will repay Judah's enemies, and bestow good on Yahweh's sinful people.

- **“To provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning”:** They will be called “oaks of righteousness,” the planting of Yahweh to display Yahweh’s glory. This new name is given in order to bring glory to Yahweh in the eyes of all nations. They will receive fine clothing and festival unguent in place of the dust poured on the head and the veil worn over the face in the ceremonial lamentations for the dead. They will have praise on their lips for blessings received, instead of listlessness and despair over their situation.
- **“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”:** Repairing the devastation of many generations is pertinent for any theological reflection in a context where the devastation caused by caste, gender, class and race hierarchies have kept human communities in “ruins.” Devastated peoples can regain the full stature of a life in freedom and dignity, and stand up as “oaks of righteousness.”

As the passage continues,

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense ... Their descendants shall be known among the nations, ... 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 (Isa 61:8–11).

Our calling

This Isaiah 61:1–4 passage is cited in Luke 4:16–17. Here as well as elsewhere in Luke, it is a vision of an alternative world that apparently is linked to the Jubilee year, Israel’s most radical hope for release and redemption. These are not social programs or specific proposals. Instead, they are acts of public imagination that still need to be shaped for implementation. Positively, they are acts that push back the frontiers so that things not thought of previously can come into view. Critically, they are an assault on all controlled thinking that insists that the way the world is organized is the only way possible. The text highlights the theme of social reversal: the poor, who are continually subjected to bad news, will receive good news; both rich and poor captives, whose lives are bound, will be released; the blind, who have been denied sight, will see again; and, the oppressed will be freed or liberated. Everything is reversed. This reversal is possible only when both the privileged and the oppressed come out of their paralysis, and work towards helping each other and fostering change in the structures of society.

Such social protest must continue, because through this the true feelings of the people can be heard. What seems to be happening instead is that we as state, society, church or community are not responding to the protests within, unable to learn or be affected by them. We must allow the energies inherent in these protests to facilitate processes of social transformation, rather than allowing our vested interests to exterminate, co-opt, or corrupt those who are oppressed.

For full healing to take place, the gap between the privileged and the oppressed requires efforts to be made by both groups. Genuine social transforma-

tion is initiated from within the community. As the poor voice their pain, the rich and powerful must be generous in responding and in pursuing policies that humanize governance, whether by the

church or state, and that are guided by concern especially for those most vulnerable.

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What are the areas where we as churches and as a Lutheran communion especially need to act? How?

Notes

¹ James Vijayakumar, "Old Testament Understanding of Human Development," in R. Gomez (ed.), *Towards a Theology of Human Development* (Chennai: Gurukul, 1998), pp. 74–75.

² Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology*, revised edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 65.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Community and Message of Isaiah 56–66* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1982).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 89.





Luke 13:10–17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing

A daughter of God's promise

On a sabbath Jesus attends worship in the local synagogue. He even teaches like he did on that sabbath in Nazareth when he made his programmatic speech at the beginning of his ministry (Lk 4:16–21). The fact that Jesus fulfilled such functions at the synagogue does not seem strange. It is simply part of the setting of the story, and is probably mentioned because it means that what he did could hardly go unnoticed. It is also taken for granted that a woman could appear at the synagogue, even though we wrongly assume that women could not be present in the Judaism of that time.

This woman has a chronic ailment. For eighteen years she has been bent over and unable to stand up straight. We might want to diagnose the condition in medical terms. Luke, however, offers the traditional explanation of the time and says that a spirit had possessed her. This later is reinforced when the spirit is named as Satan.

Some have interpreted the image of the bent woman as the prototypical illustration of the Lutheran understanding of the sinful person, who is *incurvatus/incurvata in se*—bent over, curled unto oneself. Preachers sometimes indulge in vivid descriptions of her condition as the inevitable and extreme self-orientation of someone who cannot straighten her back and raise her head to see the other person.

This is as close as one can get to an allegorical interpretation of a healing story. Tempting as it may be, it is not helpful. The damage done to people, who have to continue to live with their disabilities, is another cost of interpretations like this. People may rightly ask, “Why did Jesus not let her go without healing her? In fact, very few were healed and the others remained as they were. I must live with this tension: My

imperfect body is whole—with the disability.” (For more on this see the Village Group chapter on “Removing Barriers that Exclude.”) This is the painful dilemma of any healing story. But, in this particular case, there is also the temptation to make it a showcase for salvation.

Discuss examples of how this or other healing stories have been interpreted in painful ways like this.

The story of Jesus healing this woman is one of three sabbath healing narratives in Luke’s Gospel. Both the time (the sabbath) and the place (the synagogue) are significant. Like many of the healing stories in Luke, the point of reference for this story is Jesus’ programmatic address in the synagogue at Nazareth, also on a sabbath. Then, at the beginning of his ministry, he had claimed as his divine mandate the words from the prophets that overflow with promises of liberation associated with the Jubilee year. Now his action in another synagogue on another sabbath becomes a confirmation that indeed this was being fulfilled for them to witness.

The story in Luke 13:10–17 is probably paired with Luke 14:1–6, the healing of a man with dropsy, also on the sabbath. This pattern of parallel examples is characteristic of Luke. Some of the parallels involve a woman and a man. These “gender pairs” are like a narrative rejoinder to the composition of the group of disciples and the early Christian communities, a reminder that they consisted of men as well as women.

The restoration of the bent woman becomes a matter of controversy, and the healing story is dominated by the emerging conflict between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. The matter at stake is not the healing as such, nor that this particular woman was healed. Rather, the indignation is over its bad

timing: to heal is to work, and no work should take place on the sabbath. Apparently, Jewish miracle workers were expected to take the sabbath off. The holiness of this day of rest and worship should not be violated.

Jesus argues in favor of some work being necessary even on the sabbath. Do they not see to the needs of their animals on the sabbath? It is hypocritical not to heal the woman. The argument here is not that women should be treated at least as well as animals. Rather, Jesus is using a minor case to support a higher one. However, his opponents might respond that animals need water every day, while healing can take place any other day of the week. Jesus therefore insists that in this case the sabbath is the appropriate day. Why?

In this story, the dimension of being released or liberated is remarkably strong. Some of the Greek verbs used in the Old Testament are associated with creation and liberation. They are often translated by “freeing” or “setting free.” Jesus’ wondrous acts fulfil the liberating intention of the sabbath in that the woman is set free on this particular day, according to God’s will. In this connection Jesus refers to the woman as a daughter of Abraham. This is remarkably original language with no direct parallel usage in other texts at the time. Sons of Abraham we know, and also children, but daughters on the whole go unmentioned. Within the Jewish discourse

that Luke draws upon, descendants of Abraham are heirs to the promise God made to Abraham (*cf.* Lk 1:55).

The formulation in Luke 13:16 is an observation rather than the bestowal of an honor, even though it may subtly function in that way. This crippled and possessed woman **is** Abraham’s daughter; she does not become one. This status does not depend on her being healed by Jesus. Nor is this acknowledging any great or special piety or poverty on the woman’s part, as many interpreters assume. There is no indication anywhere in the story that she is a paragon of piety or should be counted among the *anawim*, the poor and pious, who now are being raised up. Indeed, “this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound for eighteen years,” sounds like a contradiction in terms. She is a woman with a tormenting disability who is quite simply recognized as a daughter of Abraham without any ties attached. But, it is highly appropriate that a daughter of Abraham is set free on the sabbath, the day that was an essential sign of God’s covenant with Israel.

Her healing is linked to her status as daughter, such that the healing realizes her status as daughter. The one, however, is not dependent on the other. Jesus makes this abundantly clear. She may be bent or straight, but she has her share in the blessings that flow from the fulfillment of God’s promise.

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How does this healing story speak to those you know who yearn for release or liberation?