

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
December 11, 2011
Isaiah 61.1-11
"Release to the Prisoners"
Pastor John Guthrie

Nearly every one of us has experienced the frustration of working with computers from time to time. They are amazing, wonderful examples of technology, but the problem with them is they do what you tell them to do instead of what you want them to do. And sometimes they don't even do what you tell them to do.

So to begin this morning I will share with you a few computer-related comics that I have managed to dig up.



Nós costumamos fazer compras no conforto da nossa casa, mas o maldito computador quebrou!



Those of us who have worked with computers know that there is always a way to reset a computer in case it locks up. In the old days there was a single key on the keyboard you could press. The problem was, sometimes you would press that key by accident. Not a good thing. So these days the process to reset the computer is a little more complicated, but there is still a process.

In Isaiah chapter 61, the prophet refers to a reset of Israelite society. The description of that reset can be traced to the book of Leviticus, where the year of jubilee is discussed. The year of jubilee occurred in ancient Israel every fifty years. The jubilee year was ordained to be an entire

year of rest: there was to be no sowing or reaping or harvesting. It was a year in which the Israelites were to trust that their God, the only God, would provide for them. Land that had been sold to pay debt was to be returned to the seller. Those who had sold themselves into slavery to their neighbors in order to repay a debt were also to be set totally free, along with their families. Every fifty years, according to Leviticus, Israelite society was to undergo a reset, in the name of justice, the justice that defined their God, and our God.

References to the year of jubilee abound in our reading from Isaiah today. Isaiah says that the spirit of the LORD GOD is upon him, that he has been anointed. Anointed to do what? To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to comfort those who mourn, and to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor (that would be the year of jubilee). Isaiah also proclaims a reset of the way things are for his people.

Old Testament scholars believe that this latter part of Isaiah is written in or for the people of Israel after they have been released from exile in Babylon. They have been set free! Many of them return to their land and home in Israel. But their temple is still in ruins. The holy city of Jerusalem is still leveled. They have much work to do to restore their economy, their security, their city, their temple, and their worship. This struggle is described vividly in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. After some number of years, the returned exiles begin to lose their enthusiasm and their hope. The foreigners who live in and around them oppose their rebuilding plans, and nothing happens very quickly.

Why has their joy not been realized? Why is everything turning out to be so hard? Why is it taking so long to rebuild? They are living in their own land, the land given to them by the LORD. Why are they not prospering and thriving? Had their God abandoned them after all? Was the LORD again angry over their sin?

Into this sense of frustration, fear, and dejection, Isaiah speaks his words of assurance. Good news to the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, and those who mourn. The LORD will give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a weak spirit. And they shall build up the ancient ruins and raise up the former devastations. The LORD promises these things to his people.

Mary echoes these themes in her song, recorded in the first chapter of Luke, which we also heard this morning. Mary claims that the Lord has scattered the proud and brought down the powerful and sent the rich away empty. But he has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things. These things, Mary claims, have already been done! And, Mary claims, the Lord has helped his servant Israel according to the promises he made to her. The LORD has not forgotten or forsaken his people.

Mary raises her song, of course, after the angel has come to her and told her that she is going to bear a child, that the child will be called the Son of the Most High and that he will sit on the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom will have no end. Mary knows, somehow, that the LORD is getting ready to perform a major reset. She may not completely grasp the enormity of that reset, but it will set all of history and all of creation on a new course. The kingdom of heaven is about to break into the world in a new and amazing and wonderful way.

In fact, the one who is born to Mary stands in the temple in Nazareth one day, as recorded in the fourth chapter of Luke. He is given the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolls it and reads this:

'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.'

Wow. These kinds of issues must be important to the living God. They are promised to the ancient people of Israel by God, speaking through Isaiah, in the middle of the sixth century BC. Mary sings about them. And Jesus repeats them when he stands in the Nazareth synagogue. Jesus himself is to bring good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. And he is also proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, the ultimate year of jubilee. History has been interrupted. Creation has been transformed. The world is no longer as it was. Because God has suddenly broken into the world in this one solitary man, who is more than a man.

The promises of the Father and the Son, conveyed to us by the Holy Spirit, are also ours today. The LORD promises that our ruins will be rebuilt, that those of us who are oppressed will hear good news, that those of us who are brokenhearted will be bound up, that those of us who are captives will be set free, that those of us who are prisoners will be released, and that those of us who mourn will be comforted. That sounds a whole lot like what the kingdom of heaven is like.

It is implicit in what Isaiah writes, what Mary sings, and what Jesus teaches throughout the written gospels, that you and I are to be agents of that kingdom. We are not to sit around and wait for the LORD to do all these things, but rather, we are to be those by whom the LORD's favor is shown to the oppressed, brokenhearted, captives, and mourners. You and I, and all of us together, including this fellowship that we call Community Presbyterian Church, all of us are to be active, vibrant, hopeful, joyful participants in that kingdom, which is now here and which will be made complete when Christ returns.

So when we support church workers in need and racial/ethnic schools through the Christmas Joy offering, we are binding up the brokenhearted. And when we contribute to holiday food baskets, and when the deacons distribute those baskets, we are showing the LORD's favor to the oppressed. And when our Community Presbyterian Women support our mission trips and Iron County Care and Share and the Salvation Army and the Loaves and Fishes soup kitchen and the Women's Crisis Center, they proclaim liberty to captives. And when we send mission workers to Nicaragua or the Dominican Republic or Honduras or Mexico or New Orleans or elsewhere, we do the same.

One large and influential Methodist church in our country runs a program every year in the weeks before Christmas with the name, "Christmas is Not Your Birthday." The program is a reminder that Madison Avenue and retailers have convinced us that we are supposed to be getting things, and giving things to the ones we love, during this season. This church, and other churches that have adopted the program during this season, realize that a more true expression of the spirit of Christmas is to remember those who are oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, imprisoned, and mourning in their neighborhoods and around the world. And the program invites people to contribute one dollar to a special mission fund for every dollar that they spend on themselves or their loved ones during the holidays. How about that for proclaiming the year of the LORD's favor?

Isaiah writes that the LORD loves justice. And so you and I and all of us together are to love justice. Especially, as Mary and Jesus remind us, justice for those who are oppressed, brokenhearted, captive, prisoners, and mourning.

God has made all things new time and again in history. In returning the exiles to their land and giving them the spirit to rebuild. In coming among us in Jesus of Nazareth. And finally in demonstrating divine love and favor in the return of Jesus, which we yearn for during this season of Advent. God is always resetting the way things are, and establishing justice, peace and hope. You and I, and all of us together, are called to join in that renewing of justice, until Jesus returns to fully establish the reign of God.

Isaiah also sings a song of praise in our reading today:

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.

Isaiah sings. Mary sings. We should sing, too.