

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Advent 3

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Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

He comes to set us free!

—Isaiah 61:1-3

How many of you own your own homes and have a mortgage from a bank? How many of you use credit cards to shop and buy things? How many have student loans to pay for your education? We know that 2020 has been a rough year, and pretty soon it will be 2021. How would you like it if at the end of this year every debt you had outstanding were immediately canceled? Your mortgage would be marked “paid in full,” your credit card balance would read “\$0.00” on your next statement, and you would never hear anything more about your student loans. All debts would be canceled completely. Does that sound far-fetched? That’s kind of what happened in ancient Israel at the time of the Year of Jubilee. Leviticus chapter 25 tells us that in ancient Israel every 50 years all property was to be returned to its rightful family ownership, all hired Israelites were to be freed from their obligation to work off their debts, and for a whole year the Israelites were not to plant or cultivate crops, but they were to live freely off the land, enjoying the bounty that the Lord would give them. It was a system designed to ensure that the land allocated to the Israelites stayed within the family, and it kept the Israelites from becoming slaves to debt. They could always be redeemed and set free in the Year of Jubilee.

Our economy is very different these days, and it would be very difficult to get any bank to write off your debts in the year 2020. But like so many things in the Old Testament, the Year of Jubilee provides us with a beautiful picture of the freedom that the promised Messiah was to bring. Maybe when you think of your debts you feel that you have them all under control. You can pay your bills, so you don’t lose sleep over what you owe. But you can still understand what a relief it would be to be completely debt-free—so much so that if you’ve ever listened to Dave Ramsey on the radio you know that he has days when people can call in and shout, “I’m debt free!” because it’s such a wonderful feeling. But what if you can’t pay your bills? If you have found yourselves in those shoes, you know the absolutely helpless and hopeless feeling, like you’re never going to be able to make financial ends meet, and you’re never going to be able to get yourself out from under this overwhelming obligation to your creditors. It’s a very helpless and hopeless feeling.

It’s one thing to owe a debt to another person; it’s another thing altogether to owe a debt to God. That’s not something we can manage or control. We might be inclined to trivialize our sins and think that if we didn’t kill anyone this past week or run any red lights, then all is good. God doesn’t see our sins that way. He sees all the evil we have done—and the good we have failed to do. He sees our thoughts—every bitter, resentful, angry, lustful, envious thought. Each of them adds to our debt load. Our debt is compounded by our selfishness, our looking out for ourselves while being indifferent to the needs of others. For all these things, with every sin, the debt that you and I have accumulated before God becomes more and more weighty and unwieldy. There’s no possibility of paying it back.

We need someone to cut us some slack, otherwise the sins that you and I think are so trivial and insignificant are going to catch up to us. If it takes only one sin to incur a debt that we cannot repay, what does that say about the staggering load of guilt that we have amassed with a lifetime of accumulated sins? There’s only one hope and one answer. Someone needs to step in and pay up, to remove the negative balance on your statement with God, to extricate you from this hopeless morass of sin and filth and despair that we’ve gotten ourselves into. And you and I are very thankful today that there is just such a person. He is Jesus, the one who paid our debt for us with his life of perfection and his innocent death, whose resurrection from the dead provides God’s stamp of approval as proof that our debt has been canceled.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me.” Jesus himself echoed those words of the Prophet Isaiah when he sat in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. “I’m the fulfillment of the prophet’s message,” said Jesus. “I’m the one who is here on this earth, *“because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion.”* Jesus came to proclaim the ultimate year of the LORD’s favor, the final cancellation of all the debt of sin, and the restoration of a relationship of peace between God and humanity.

Let’s look at each of those in turn: *“The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”* Jesus isn’t talking about people who don’t have money. He’s talking about being poor in the things that God requires and lacking the things that make a person rich in the sight of God, namely righteousness and obedience—we just don’t have them by ourselves, and we are poor without them. But for the poor, namely for us poor sinners, God has some good news. His Son Jesus Christ enters our hearts and tells us that we are no longer poor in the sight of God. Jesus has canceled our debt by paying the price for our sins with his blood; that zeroes our balance. Jesus has credited us with the righteousness we need; that gives us a positive balance on God’s ledger.

“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.” Are you brokenhearted? Have you ever been brokenhearted? When we’re young and idealistic we’re filled with vigor and optimism, but life has a way of leaving us beaten and broken. As

the years roll on, we grapple with broken hopes, broken aspirations, shattered dreams, broken relationships. We find ourselves brokenhearted when we have to deal with the sting of death. We wrestle with the reality of our own mortality. The day comes when we gaze upon the shell of a loved whose spirit has departed, leaving us brokenhearted. Jesus binds up the brokenhearted with the promise of heaven, the promise of a glorious future with him in paradise that will never end. He takes away the sting of death by reminding us that when a loved one departs in faith it's just a brief separation until we're reunited again in heaven.

"To proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." The prophet describes the captivity of the prison of sin, a dungeon of despair and darkness without hope for escape. Are there things that keep you enslaved? Bad habits? Vices? Addictions? Toxic relationships. Those are the old way. Jesus sets us free from the shackles of sin that enslave us to the powers of Satan and compel us to serve the devil. The celebration of Christ's Jubilee means that you don't have to live your life the way it's always been, as a slave to pet sins, to anger, to doubt, to bad habits, slaves to your past. All that slavery is done and gone, and Jesus has replaced it with freedom: freedom to love, freedom to serve, freedom to live life to the glory of God.

"To proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God." In ancient Israel, when the fifty-year Jubilee rolled around, on the great Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), the trumpet was sounded, and liberty was proclaimed throughout the land. (That phrase was taken and applied to not a trumpet but a bell; the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia bears the inscription of Leviticus 25:10.) That's what it was like when Christ was revealed to the world. It was as if God smiled down on a world of darkness and frustration with his beams of love and grace. When Jesus preached the Good News, it was as if the sweet sound of liberty echoed throughout the land. When Jesus cried out on the cross, "It is finished," it confirmed the sound of liberty and freedom to a world formerly held in Satan's bondage, but now released from sin to serve the true and living God. But you notice that the year of the Lord's favor is also called *"the day of vengeance of our God."* The same freedom that releases the sinner also announces the defeat of Satan and heralds the vengeance of God's justice upon the arrogant and the proud. Finally, when the Lord returns on the last day for judgment, the same trumpet call that announces victory and freedom for the believing, will proclaim vengeance and eternal death upon Satan and all who have followed him.

We celebrate the Jubilee of our God, and as we prepare to meet Jesus, Isaiah the prophet describes what God has done for us and will do eternally for us who are in Christ Jesus. He has bestowed on us *"a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."* Ashes were a symbol of repentance and mourning. You will remember that when Jonah the prophet went to Nineveh, the people repented in sackcloth and ashes. They took off their fine garments and put on sackcloth (like burlap) and sat in dust and ashes to show their sorrow for sins. We too repent before God figuratively in sackcloth and ashes when we humble ourselves before God and confess our sins to him, pleading for his mercy. But the prophet tells us that God doesn't leave us in the dust and ashes. He picks us up from our sorry state, and he crowns us with a crown of beauty, and he says, "You are my child, you belong to my family; you are a kingly priest, an heir of the kingdom." He removes our old spiritual garments of sin and guilt and dresses us up in new robes, robes that have been washed of the stain of sin and made pure and white in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ.

And finally he says, *"They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor."* In ancient Israel, at the time when the Israelites were given to the worship of the false gods of the Canaanites—Baal, Asherah and others—when you saw a grove of trees you were reminded of sinful behavior, because it was on top of the hills, in the sacred groves, under every spreading tree, that the sexual filth of pagan worship was carried out. In contrast to that sinful picture, Isaiah paints a different picture, a picture of the people of God standing tall and strong in contrast to the wickedness around them, not a "sacred grove" in which false worship and sexual debauchery took place, but a *"planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor,"* strong, stalwart trees of righteousness, standing tall as a testimony to the LORD and his grace that set his people apart from the wickedness of the world around them.

My friends, freedom has come to the world, but many people do not know of the Jubilee that Jesus came to establish. There are lots of people who are still captive in the dungeon of sin and darkness, whose hearts are broken and whose lives are falling apart. The light of the gospel burns in your heart. Let your light shine, so that you become a messenger of peace, a messenger of Jesus your Savior to proclaim liberty throughout the land. Your debt has been paid, and now there is only one debt still outstanding. It's a debt of love, a debt of gratitude, a debt of thankfulness to the one who came to bring light and life and peace, who came to set us free. Amen.