

First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)
Dr. Barry M. Foster
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The Year of the Lord's Favor

Isaiah 30:15-21 (NIV)

15 This is what the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One of Israel, says:

*“In repentance and rest is your salvation,
in quietness and trust is your strength,
but you would have none of it.*

16 You said, ‘No, we will flee on horses.’

Therefore you will flee!

You said, ‘We will ride off on swift horses.’

Therefore your pursuers will be swift!

17 A thousand will flee

at the threat of one;

at the threat of five

you will all flee away,

till you are left

like a flagstaff on a mountaintop,

like a banner on a hill.”

18 Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you;

therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.

For the Lord is a God of justice.

Blessed are all who wait for him!

19 People of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. 20 Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. 21 Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”

Luke 4:14-30 (NIV)

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

18 “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,

19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

23 Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

24 “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. 25 I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. 26 Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. 27 And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

28 All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. 30 But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

[Recording] Opening

Good morning church! I want to thank all of you who have been praying for Mary and me, who have been asking about how we’re doing, and checking up on us. We’re both doing fine; with God’s help we weathered this storm without any real hardships. My experience with COVID was pretty mild, for which I’m grateful. I know that others have had a far worse time of it, so I don’t want to

minimize the danger of this virus or pretend that it isn't serious. I'm just glad that it wasn't any worse for us. And even though yesterday was my official release date, I've continued to quarantine through today just to be on the safe side of things. But I'm quite eager to be out and about again.

A couple of months ago, I was wrestling with the all of the ongoing problems from the pandemic that we were facing as a church, thinking about Advent and Christmas and the new year, wondering what was on God's heart for us for 2021. I was asking God, "*Where are we going? What do we need to hear?*" And in the middle of all my wondering, I felt like I heard something from God—a phrase that immediately rang true in my spirit: *the year of the Lord's favor*.

The year of the Lord's favor—it was a perfect thought that captured an idea that could be our theme for 2021. If the phrase that announced our stewardship commitment was "*forward together*," this phrase said what it was we were going forward to. I wrote the words on my white board in my office, and started pondering how to approach 2021.

Then I watched as our carefully prepared plans starting falling apart. I got my membership card in the COVID club and had to bow out of the Christmas Eve service—the first time in my life in ministry that I wasn't at church on Christmas Eve (maybe the first time in my life since I was nine years old!). It was too late to pull our advertising for the live service for that night—the ads had already run—but we weren't sure about opening the doors. Then we did—and Greg and the worship and tech teams did a wonderful job. Then we discovered that more people had tested positive, including an exposure in the church and more things started falling apart. We reluctantly concluded that we had to close the live option for worship for this Sunday and next. What a crazy year, right? (But—remember, we're not going to complain. God has been good to us, and many, many people and churches are in seriously worse situations than we are.)

In spite of all of this, even though it feels a little like I'm standing in the pile of wreckage that was our plans (and for a planner, that always feels a little nerve-racking), I still believe not only that I heard from God, but that the word he spoke to me is the message that God wants us to hear at the start of this year: 2021 is to be the year of the Lord's favor for us, for you, for your family, for this church, for this community, for this nation, this world.

Isaiah 30

The passage from Isaiah 30 is a somber reminder that God continues to be involved with his creation and with his people. It is easy for us to forget about God as we live out our daily lives. When good times are here, when I have a job and the

job is going well; when the family is all healthy and there aren't any catastrophes happening in my immediate world; when the future looks bright, or at least promising; then it's easy to forget God. The world around me is so very visible and reasonably understandable, God can easily become an afterthought. Oh, sure, I believe he's real; he's just not very immediate, not on the radar, so to speak.

The same can be said when things are going badly. When the economy is foundering and my income has dried up to a fraction of what it was, or disappeared entirely; when sickness isn't just close by, but is rampaging through my friends and family; when catastrophes of every kind are falling like waves all around me; when the future is threatening and there doesn't seem to be a way out of the sinkhole that has become my life; then it's easy to forget about God in the midst of the panic that has set in and forced itself into my vision.

The kingdom of Judah in the eighth century BC was right in the midst of both of these pictures. The recent past had been a time of the greatest prosperity the nation had seen in two hundred years. That was matched with the longest period of peace and stability it had known since the days of King Solomon. Commerce was steady, money was pouring in from taxes and trade, and the business of religion was rolling along quite nicely in the capital of Jerusalem. If anyone thought about God, it was only to assure themselves that God was clearly blessing them.

But trouble was on the horizon. The Assyrians were coming and conquest was in their mind. News of how they had steamrolled through the other small kingdoms in the region was carried by the caravans. That news brought distress and anxiety. You see, most countries deny their atrocities; the Assyrians boasted about theirs. Fear was multiplying by the moment.

But God wasn't in the picture.—not when an actual, knowable enemy with weapons and tactics and victories that could all be counted was on the way. What was needed, everyone said, was a strong ally—Egypt, perhaps. An ally who could raise an army to equal the Assyrians and hold off the invaders. It would cost a lot to buy their help, but surely that would be a price well worth paying to avoid being destroyed. And if someone mentioned God at all, it was only to reassure each other that since his temple was in Jerusalem, surely he would not allow the city to be captured. So he would certainly understand the importance of building alliances with powerful kings in order to protect his interests in Judah.

This was the situation when the prophet Isaiah (along with a few other prophets, like Amos, Hosea, and Micah) began to remind the people that God still had something to say to them. He wasn't unaware or uninvolved. He was very

present—even though the nation had stopped considering him altogether. So Isaiah began rebuking the people for their sins. You see, when you forget about God, when he’s more of a vague idea in the background than the living ruler of your nation, your family, and you; then it isn’t long before you forget about the things that he said to do, the way you were supposed to live; what your life was supposed to look like and why. But God is still paying attention—and insists on informing us about what ought to be the case.

Judah was facing the crushing weight of a foreign invasion. But it wasn’t just something that was happening because a more powerful empire wanted to do what empires do, which is to gobble up everything on its borders and expand its control. What was happening was actually the judgment of God, a judgment that was coming upon Judah because of their failure to live in accordance with the covenant that made them God’s people. The people of Judah wanted to have God’s blessings; they wanted to have his protection; they wanted to have the good things that came from him. But they didn’t want to live as his people.

So instead of turning to God when the threat of disaster was coming upon them, the king and his advisors thought, *“Who can we find to help us? What political solution can we find? With whom can we make an alliance that will provide us with the military and economic strength, with the advanced technological weaponry that we will need to defeat our enemies? Who cares if they aren’t worshipers of God? We can work out a religious agreement as long as they can fight the Assyrians for us.”*

The end result was not pretty. All of their contrived efforts to save themselves were demolished. Egypt was completely overmatched and destroyed by the Assyrians. Instead of coming to the rescue as the heroes, Egypt was itself defeated and forced to pay tribute to the conquering Assyrians. Judah was humiliated and plundered, reduced to being a conquered people; laden with burdensome taxes to their foreign oppressors that ended their season of prosperity.

And still—no one thought that God might have something to do with what was going on. So Isaiah spoke up.

What is so powerful about this passage is that it clearly shows us the heart of God. In the midst of Isaiah’s rebuke of the nation for their stubbornness, for their lack of repentance, for their complete disregard for God and his ways, God still announces that he is waiting patiently for his people to return to him; he offers this disobedient and self-centered people his love. He is hoping that they will respond.

The Lord longs to be gracious to you. I don't know of a better passage than Isaiah 30:18 to show the heart of God. *The Lord longs to be gracious—to you!* His deepest desire is to show you his kindness. He *longs* to be kind; he is passionately eager to be merciful. God doesn't enjoy punishing anyone. He is slow to anger, the scripture says; abounding in steadfast love. Love and kindness are his deepest wells, the greatest treasures in his storehouse, the things he has the most of and wants to show the most. He won't excuse sin; he never ignores it. And he will certainly judge us if we do not repent. But judgment is never God's first choice, never his first option. He *longs to be gracious*.

Longs . . . It's a powerful word; it's a picture of heartache. A picture of heartbreak. It's a picture of a parent who is watching a beloved child spurn every attempt to help her escape from her downward self-destructive spiral.

God won't force anyone to receive his love. But notice what else this passage says: even when his people are experiencing the adversity that comes from his judgment, God insists that he will not abandon them. He continues to speak to them, to correct them, to advise and counsel them. *“You will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘this is the way.’”* God says, *“I will be right behind you, when you start to turn aside to listen to the empty promises of those who cannot satisfy you. I will be right beside you when you turn toward the distractions that are calling out to you. That's my voice in your ears telling you that this is not the way that leads home; that's my voice reminding you of what is true, what is good, what is lasting, what is real.”*

Luke 4

That image of God deeply desiring to be gracious was what Jesus wanted people to understand when he announced to the synagogue in his home town that he had come to fulfill the prophecy in another passage from Isaiah, this one from chapter 61.

When Jesus returned to Nazareth, he had already launched his ministry of healing and teaching around Galilee, beginning from Capernaum, a few miles east on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. From verse 23, we can tell that his reputation had already spread throughout the region: even in the out-of-the-way village of Nazareth, they had heard the talk about his miracles and his authoritative teaching. They were curious, but skeptical. How could this nobody, this day laborer construction worker, be someone special, a prophet?

Nevertheless, despite their cold reception, Jesus made his announcement. *“Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”* What was it that was fulfilled?

It was the announcement that the one whom God had promised to send was here, the one who would open the eyes of the blind, heal the legs of the crippled, set free those who were oppressed and imprisoned. He was announcing for those who had ears to hear, who could see past the mundane affairs of daily life, who had a heart that was sensitized to the whispers of God's Spirit— *“He's here! The day has finally come. It is the time for the year of God's favor, the day that the kingdom of God will arrive.”*

Jesus was offering the people of Nazareth what he was offering to Israelites everywhere—the kingdom of God was now here. The *“year of the Lord's favor”* wasn't a twelve-month period of good things happening, but the arrival of a new age. It signaled a new opportunity to realize what God desired for his people. What they had been longing for and waiting for was now available—but only to those who would respond with faith.

And that was not going to be easy for the people of Nazareth. They had known Jesus for most of his life. Sure, he was a good man. Took care of his family. Stepped up when Joseph passed away (God rest his soul!). Never complained about working wherever work could be found—usually in Sepphoris, an hour's walk away. But they hadn't seen any miracles from this one. Who did he think he was?

The unbelief of his home town was stunning to Jesus, though, as he pointed out, not unexpected. Who thinks that the boy you've watched grow up would become a prophet? Their skepticism revealed the true state of their heart: they remained unbelieving, waiting for a sign to convince them that what they've heard is real. They couldn't see the prophet; all they saw was the boy from the village.

But what was even more shocking than their unbelief was their response to Jesus when he pointed out how God had been gracious to Gentiles in the Old Testament. Their own Scriptures showed that God's kindness and goodness were always intended to be shown to all the nations, not just to Israel. But for the Jews in Nazareth, that was too much to consider. Hadn't it been the Gentiles who had taken them captive into exile? Weren't the pagan Romans occupying their land? Weren't their idols polluting the country even now? That Jesus would suggest that God would favor the Gentiles with his kingdom was obscene—and the people of Nazareth reacted with anger. They forced him out of the synagogue, out of town, intending to kill him, or at least make sure he understood that he was no longer welcome in town.

All because Jesus dared to suggest that God would show his kindness and mercy to the Gentiles. That the year of God's favor might include someone they

hated, someone they despised. That God's kingdom might be big enough for others who didn't fit in, who didn't know about the true God.

But let's talk about us, not about the people of the first century. What does it mean for us to experience "*the year of God's favor*"?

First, we need to understand that we're not talking about twelve months on a calendar, or a new season we happen to call 2021 or "spring" or whatever. We're not talking just about seeing the pandemic fade away and life going back to what we think of as "normal." *The year of God's favor* is a new age; it is an entirely new way of living—it is living in the knowledge of the favor of God. It is living, knowing what it means to be loved by God, to be wanted by him; to be welcomed into his presence and kingdom.

Is that where you live today? Are you living in the awareness of God's favor? Living knowing that God deeply loves you and desires to show you his kindness? That he is longing to be gracious to you?

Are you expecting good from God, or are you expecting his punishment? Do you think of him waiting to show you his kindness, or waiting to catch you messing up? Do you think of God as happy to see you, or disappointed in you?

"*The year of the Lord's favor*" is not just a clever slogan for a chance at a new start for the new year. It is a declaration that Jesus has opened the way for us to live in the new age, where we know that God is for us; that he is longing to be gracious to us; that he has good in store for us—no matter what happens with the virus, with the economy, with your family's health or circumstances. God's favor is upon us—not because we are so wonderful, but because he is so good.

God is calling us, First Christian Church, to understand that it is time for a new year. A year in which we joyfully announce that God has come to show his kindness to us—and not only to us, but to a lot of undesirable people who need to know that he is longing to be gracious to them, too.

God is still in the reclamation business. He is still turning ashes into beauty. Still changing lives of people who are broken and messed up, making them ambassadors of his kingdom and sending them out to tell others about the love of God that doesn't excuse sin, but transforms sinners into saints.

You could be one of those people. Why not believe? Let Jesus work his miracle in you; let him heal your hardened heart and your crusty soul. Let him change you; you need the change and you'll be happier with the result of having him run your life instead of you ruining it. Let this year of God's favor be the year of your new start to a life that will never end.

[Slide x] *Transition to communion*

[Worship team, if you would begin making your way to the platform . . . ; those who are helping to serve communion please join me in the front . . .]

Benediction /Blessing

Please be careful to maintain our safe distancing practice as you leave.

[Lift your hearts to heaven, and your hands if you like . . .]