

Even Jesus could barely get away with prophecy.
In Luke, Chapter 4, we read:

*Jesus went to Nazareth,
where he had been brought up,
and on the Sabbath day
he went into the synagogue,
as was his custom.
And he stood up to read.
The scroll of the prophet Isaiah
was handed to him.
Unrolling it, he found the place
where it is written:
“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom
for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind, to release
the oppressed, to proclaim
the year of the Lord’s favor.”
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,
and he began by saying to them,
“Today this scripture
is fulfilled in your hearing.”
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.*

So far, so good.
Bolstered by their response,
Jesus turns more prophetic.
He affirms that God’s plan of salvation
is for all people, not only for Jews.
This notion, however,
gets Jesus booted out of the synagogue.
Local boy or not, the people pursue him.
Eluding the crowd just in time,
Jesus is spared a nasty jump over the cliffs
without a bungee cord.

It’s tough being a prophet
(especially in your hometown).
Today we don’t have many prophets around,
who take the risk of speaking for God.
Those who do are looked at askance.
We are suspicious of a preacher who claims:
“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me.
The Lord has anointed me and has sent me
to bring good news to the oppressed.”
It must be tough for Isaiah
to proclaim in our lesson:
“this is the year of the Lord’s favor,” the Jubilee.
The exiles he is preaching to
have come to believe
that God has abandoned them –
has broken a covenant
that goes all the way back to Abraham.
For some 50 years,
they’ve endured captivity in Babylon.
All that time,
invaders have occupied the homeland,
Judah and Jerusalem.
Word has it that it’s a very different place now.
The Temple lies in ruins.
Other people are living in the towns
and villages their parents called home.
Foreigners are farming the land
their grandparents inherited
from their ancestors.
But now the prophet, Isaiah, pronounces this
the Year of Yahweh’s Favor, or Jubilee.
Isaiah is trying to motivate the people
to return and reclaim their heritage.
Jubilee Year?
They’ll believe it when they see it.
Perhaps some of you grew up
on ancestral land.
Suppose your grandparents suffered a bad year
and had to mortgage half of their land.
Twenty-five years later, your father
inherited that land along with the mortgage.
Then he married your mother.
Your parents leased the fields
to a food company.

They mortgaged the farmhouse
to put you and your siblings through school.
For twenty-four years, your parents worked
factory and office jobs to pay down the debts.
But what if they went to church in December
and heard the preacher announce:
This is the Year of the Lord's Jubilee.
In the fiftieth year,
the lease would revert back
to your parents without penalty.
The mortgage would be written off.
After 49 years of encumbrance,
the homestead would be theirs,
free and clear.
That sense of Jubilation is what Isaiah
is announcing to the exiles returning to Judea.
The further message is
*"The vengeance of the Lord is yours.
What you had before you left
will be yours once more.
You shall be called priests of the Lord
and ministers of our God."*
The Biblical record does not indicate
that the Jubilee Year ever materializes.
Instead, returning exiles compete
for the same parcels of land with the invaders
who have occupied them for 50 years.
The rebuilding of the nation of Israel
does not happen in a single year.
For the remaining *centuries*
of Israel's history,
especially as other powers lay claim
to their little swatch of earth,
the people hold out hope for the time,
the 'kairos', when the land, the nation,
and the people
would wonder-fully be restored.
In the era following return from exile,
this is expressed as expectation for a Messiah,
the hope that God will raise up someone
(probably from a royal or priestly line)
who will lead the nation
in restoring God's will on earth.
Fast forward to that day, when,
in the synagogue of Nazareth,

Jesus announces the reign of God
as his prophetic mission.
"Today the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."
We, his followers, do believe in the Advent
of the Reign of God with Christ's incarnation.
In this season of Advent, we affirm
what Jesus' hometown couldn't accept:
God is with us. Emmanuel. ■

In Mayan communities in Chiapas,
the local religious leaders are called
animadores del corazón,
"animators of heart."
Their pastoral role among the community
is to enlarge hearts,
restoring hope and strength.
If you spend even a short time
in one of their religious communities,
you realize how important the heart is.
They don't ask, "How are you?"
They say, "Come in, sit down.
How big is your heart?"

As these weeks of Advent roll along,
we can start to enlarge our hearts,
made small by loss, anxiety, disappointment,
and fear.
We hear once again the strong promise,
affirmed by Jesus himself
that the Reign of God has begun.
We trust once again in the New Covenant,
through which God forgives sins,
pours out the Holy Spirit upon believers,
and grants us hearts of obedience.
We cannot expect an instant Advent "makeover,"
any more than the Hebrew exiles expected it.
Building the Kingdom happens in increments,
some too small to notice.
But they do occur.
Modern oppressions – trigger-happy cops,
terrorist outrage, homophobia, growing old –
can be eased by even a little change
in someone else's treatment of us.
Spirits broken by loss of income, loss of
mobility, or distance from family can be
bandaged by love and service to others.

Captivity to substance abuse, identity theft,
or difficult family relationships
can be liberated a bit
when we reclaim our place
as God's beloved children.
What we celebrate in Advent
is the return of hope.
With each new reason for hope comes resilience.
With each increment of resilience
comes the creativity to build up ancient ruins,
repair ruined cities,
and restore the devastations of the past,
to use Isaiah's metaphors.

In Advent the spirit of the Lord God is upon *us*
because the Lord has anointed us.
Our faith tradition claims that each of us
is anointed in baptism to serve as prophet —
and priest. Our Book of Order declares:
The *anointing* of all baptized persons
is to the total ministry of the church
[G-6.0102].

There are various *forms* of ministry —
forms in which the emphasis
is on proclamation of the Word
and the celebration of the Sacraments;
forms that stress deeds of love and mercy;
forms that are educational, administrative,
legislative, or judicial;
and forms that are prophetic [G-6.0104].
Baptisms are perpetual cause for Jubilation.

We are called as priests and ministers
to inaugurate the Reign of God.
In Advent the spirit of the Lord God is upon us,
because the Lord is anointing us
to proclaim the year of the Lord.

It is not yet time for Jubilation.
But there are signs of the Spirit of the Lord
at work, enlarging hearts.

For example,
take our society's growing resilience
in the matter of same-sex marriage.
Six years ago, a cover story in Newsweek
was a prophetic sign of change
in public opinion.

"The Religious Case for Gay Marriage"
was an article by Lisa Miller, herself a lesbian
who writes for the magazine
on matters religious.

The article takes a prophetic stand
on the last serious argument
against full rights for same-sex couples,
the religious argument.

Two quotes give you the author's viewpoint.

First, "while the Bible and Jesus
say many important things
about love and family,
neither explicitly defines marriage
as between one man and one woman."
And second, "no sensible modern person
wants marriage — theirs or anyone else's —
to look in its particulars anything like
what the Bible describes [as marriage]."

Instead, the article judges marriage
in the full context of the values and principles
the Bible expresses, not by the details
of Biblical laws and practices,
which are all over the map.

It quotes Walter Brueggemann,
that the sweep of the Biblical narrative,
from Old Testament to New Testament,
is toward inclusiveness.

In a similar way, hearts within the PC(USA)
are enlarging for ordination of GLBT persons.
In 2008 the General Assembly
overturned decades of restrictions
against the ordination of persons
who have sexual relationships outside of
a marriage between a man and a woman.

Now, a more biblical (and actually less radical)
standard of conduct for ordination has been
approved by a majority of presbyteries.

However, the General Assembly's openness
to ordination of GLBT persons
has irreparably divided
a number of Presbyterian churches.

I once served on a presbytery commission
that tried to restore peace to a congregation
divided over ordination of gays and lesbians.

While with them, I experienced no Jubilation over the divisiveness and name-calling, there were prophetic signs in the outcome. When a majority of the congregation voted to leave the denomination, scores of loyal PCUSA members (I called them exiles) were abandoned by the majority. The exiles comforted one another. They experienced a kind of salvation at no longer being subjected to persecution. They reported a sense of liberation from their congregation's narrow-mindedness. In the end, God provided these church exiles Isaiah's garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning.

In the darkest times, when disaster looms, God sends prophets to remind us, as Isaiah reminds the exiles of Babylon, that since God Is With Us, we can rise above the devastation of our lives. The Advent of the Reign of God comes to us in a thousand little signs. Isaiah's anointed call is still our anointed call: Preach good news ... bind up broken hearts... proclaim freedom to captives... comfort those who mourn.

CONCLUSION

Shirley Guthrie, a Presbyterian scholar and minister who authored a book on Christian doctrine which I consult frequently, wrote an Advent devotion based on Isaiah 61 with which I will close: Christians bear witness to the presence of God in the world in the following ways:

- By the way they drive their cars on expressways, treat checkout clerks at the grocery store, pay attention to those who serve them by collecting their garbage or taking their order at restaurants;
- By the political programs and economic policies they support –

especially when their stand threatens the self-interest of the particular political, racial or economic group to which they themselves belong.

- By the way they keep hoping and working for change in people and institutions when others say that nothing can be done.

- By the way they are saddened or outraged by events that cause some others to rejoice, and rejoice when some others are bitterly disappointed.

- By the way they remain calm when others panic and are deeply disturbed when others are complacent.

- By their indifference to whether they or the church gets the credit when the cause of justice, freedom and peace is advanced, being just as glad when it happens as the result of others' efforts as when it happens as the result of their own efforts.

In baptism God anoints us – all of us – to preach ... bind up ... proclaim ... and comfort.

May your baptism be cause for Jubilation. Amen.