

# Time of Release

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*Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)  
January 23, 2022*

*Text: Luke 4:14-21*

I was talking to a friend this week who had recently visited a health-care provider. In this health-care provider's office was a sign that read, "Please be kind to the staff. If you are unable to be kind, you will be denied care and asked to leave." My friend had never seen any notice like this, and was just astounded that the people who ran the office found it necessary. Evidently a large number of their clients needed a reminder to show basic decency.

But this doesn't seem to be an outlier, does it? People are acting out everywhere. Last year the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported that traffic fatalities had risen to the highest level since 2007, even as people drove fewer miles due to the pandemic.<sup>1</sup> The rise was driven by an increase in risky behavior, such as failing to wear a seatbelt, speeding, and drunk driving.

The Federal Aviation Administration reported a record number of incidents of unruly passengers on airplanes, leading to over a thousand investigations—more than five times the number in any prior year.<sup>23</sup> Even school children are affected, with school administrators reporting a high number of problems with discipline this year.<sup>4</sup> Maybe you've experienced this edginess with kids in your family, or fellow customers in the store, or at a community meeting. It just seems to be a feature of the era we're living in. Two years into the ongoing pandemic, we're all feeling a bit frayed and fed up. That's not to condone bad behavior. But I think we can recognize that everybody is carrying a lot of stuff right now.

In the gospel lesson for this morning, Jesus speaks about good news, release, healing, and freedom. This is his first sermon, the beginning of his public teaching, and so this is where he tells us what it's all about, why he's here, what his purpose is. And there is a word for us here as well. We carry out Jesus' purposes when we do as he did—giving, forgiving, and setting free.

First, it's important to understand the text from the book of Isaiah that Jesus decided to read. Isaiah spoke these words to the Jewish people when they were held captive as exiles in Babylon. Isaiah announced that a new time had come, a time he called "the year of the Lord's favor." In the book of Leviticus, God commanded the observance of the Jubilee every fifty years. Jubilee was a time of release and new beginnings. In the Jubilee, if you had gotten into financial trouble and sold your

1 "2020 Fatality Data Show Increased Traffic Fatalities During Pandemic." National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. 3 Jun 2021. <https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/2020-fatality-data-show-increased-traffic-fatalities-during-pandemic>.

2 "2021 Unruly Passenger Data." Federal Aviation Administration. [https://www.faa.gov/data\\_research/passengers\\_cargo/unruly\\_passengers/2021\\_archive/](https://www.faa.gov/data_research/passengers_cargo/unruly_passengers/2021_archive/).

3 "Airlines report 3,000 unruly passengers this year in US." *BBC News*. 15 Jun 2021. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57480633>.

4 Erin Einhorn, "Advocates fear suspensions could add to pandemic pain for vulnerable students." *NBC News*. 2 Jan 2022. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/education/school-suspension-covid-mental-health-rcna10329>.

ancestral land to your neighbor, you got it back on the fiftieth year at no cost. In the Jubilee, your loans, your debts are canceled. If you sold yourself into slavery so your family could eat, you could be free. Jubilee was God's gift, a chance to start over, with everyone equally free to enjoy the blessings that God had given to all of them.

And so Isaiah brought this image forward to talk about what God was doing in his time. Because the people had trusted in idols and neglected the poor, they had incurred a debt, and they had been held captive by their enemies, the Babylonians. But now God was bringing about their release, forgiving their sin, and giving them a chance to start over.

By reading the words of Isaiah, by announcing that they are coming true today, right then and there in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus is announcing Jubilee in his own time as well. He's here to bring release to the captives. Isaiah was probably talking about people held captive in exile and yearning to return home, but Jesus was referring to people who were exiles in their own land, or in their own bodies, in the grip of illness and injustice. Jesus says he is here to bring recovery of sight to the blind. He does literally give blind people back their sight. But he also shows everyone a new way of seeing God's abundance, where there was only scarcity. He opens eyes to new hope and possibility. Jesus says he is here to let the oppressed go free. And the people are suffering under Roman oppression, but also the oppression of sin, the oppression of religious authorities that impose ridiculous burdens. Jesus is here to bring freedom. That's his good news. That's his gospel.

Isaiah, searching for good news, reached back in time and found Jubilee. Jesus looking for words to speak good news in his own time, reached back and found Isaiah. Today we reach back and lay hold of Jesus and his words in the synagogue of his hometown. There's a chain here, where God's activity among our ancestors in faith echoes down through the years, again and again. God's promises of relief and release continue to resonate, such that when they come true once they're not finished, but persist in their power down through the generations. God's promises come true over and over again. That's their nature, and that's why we remember them. That's why we read the scriptures. "Today the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," said Jesus, and my hope, my aim today, every Sunday, is to say the same.

How is this scripture fulfilled in our hearing? How does God's promise of release and new beginnings find purchase in us today?

This week I've been thinking about some words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrated last week. In a sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, less than a month before his death, he spoke about the interconnectedness of all people, and why the cause of justice ought to matter to everyone. He called it "an inescapable network of mutuality," and he said that "whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."<sup>5</sup> In other words, racism and poverty and injustice ultimately hurt certain people directly, but they ultimately hurt all of us, because our well-being is tied to that of our neighbors. And in the modern age, commerce and technology and rapid transportation mean that our connections to others quickly run as far as the other side of the world.

Look, when I bind you tighter—when I snap crossly at you over something small, when I hold a grudge and refuse to forgive, when I refuse to lift a finger to lighten your load as you stagger under a burden of injustice or grief or anything else you might be carrying—that limits your freedom to move in your other relationships,

5 Martin Luther King, Jr., "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution." Delivered at the National Cathedral, Washington, D.C., on 31 March 1968. Congressional Record, 9 April 1968. [https://web.archive.org/web/20110603032638/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_remaining\\_aware\\_through\\_a\\_great\\_revolution](https://web.archive.org/web/20110603032638/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_remaining_aware_through_a_great_revolution).

and the tightness ripples outward along those lines of interconnectedness. The child scolded by a stressed out parent acts out in class at school. The overwhelmed teacher takes it out on his spouse, who bawls out her subordinates in the office, setting them on edge when they go home to their children. Or, to bring this back more closely to Dr. King's struggle, think about what the stress of living with prejudice and discrimination does to families and communities, and how it cycles back through the human networks we belong to. The knot that we're all part of tightens, and it squeezes us all.

But if I loosen those same ties—if I meet your crabbiness with understanding, if I forgive hurts, if I show you generosity in spirit and generosity in material goods according to my ability—that frees you to do the same in your other relationships, and that release also ripples outward. Jesus came to proclaim Jubilee. He demonstrated that most openly and most profoundly on the cross, making a gift of his life in a way that we didn't deserve, but making that gift freely and willingly, in a way that freed us from the burden of our sin, freed us to be generous and merciful toward others. Jubilee was always meant for everyone—especially the least and most burdened by debt, but ultimately a new beginning for all. And Jesus announces, "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Now more than ever we're aware of the tightening of those bonds around us, and how the burdens our neighbors are carrying weigh on us as well. Somehow we need to find the space in our own lives to practice Jubilee, to free the people around us, so that they can free the people around them, and on and on. That's hard right now, and I won't pretend otherwise. But Jesus set an example for us of what it looks like to take on others' burdens, and he's there to take on ours too.

These are hard times. So take some time to pray about it. Name the burdens you're carrying, and ask God's help. Ask your friends in this community too—we don't know what's weighing on you unless you tell us. Make use of the mercy that God promises, so that you can release the knots that tie us all. I don't think we're going to get through this time except with mercy, forbearance, and kindness.

"Today," Jesus says, "the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Lord Jesus, make us a fulfillment of your promise today. Amen.