

Isaiah lived during a very difficult time. He lived in a time where it seemed like there was crisis after crisis and disaster after disaster. When he was a young man, for example, the northern kingdom of Israel threatened to invade the southern kingdom. They made an alliance with the kingdom of Damascus and were planning to invade Jerusalem and to take it for themselves. And it was only narrowly that they missed having that happen. When Isaiah was middle-aged, Assyria invaded and conquered the northern kingdom, carrying all the people away into exile, so that now many of the tribes of Israel were gone forever. And now in his old age, Assyria was invading again, threatening to destroy the southern kingdom just as it had destroyed the northern kingdom all those years ago. All of this was very difficult to deal with, but what made things especially difficult was what God said was going to happen in the days ahead. God told King Hezekiah that Judah would also be carried off, that her people would be taken away into exile, that the treasuries of the house of the Lord would be carried off to Babylon. They would be conquered just as their northern brothers had been. So on top of crisis after crisis and disaster after disaster, it seemed like the future had no hope. Where could they possibly turn in those dark and difficult days?

But what made all of this especially difficult, Christians, was this feeling that somehow God's promises had failed through all of this. Because God had made so many promises to his people in years gone by. God had promised Abraham that he and his descendants would take possession of the land, that it would belong to them forever. God had promised Abraham that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. God had promised Abraham that his offspring would possess the gates of their enemies, that they would be victorious. And God had promised David that a son from his own body would sit on his throne forever. God had made all of these promises to them and more besides. But now it seemed like they were all failing. Where was God's promise that they would possess the land when Assyria and then Babylon ruled over them? Where was God's promise that they would be as numerous as the stars of heaven when so many had died because of these wars? Where was the promise that they would possess the gates of their enemies when it was their enemies who possessed theirs? Where was the promise that a son of David would sit on his throne forever when it seemed like that line was coming to an end? Was it all coming apart? Did God's promises mean nothing? Could they trust God? Could they turn to him for help? What were they supposed to do in those dark and difficult days?

And Christians, how easy it is for us to do the same thing when we are faced with our own difficulties! Because it's easy enough for us to trust God when things are going well, but can we still hold on to his promises when things seem to be falling apart? God has promised to be with us, even to the very end of the age. Do we believe that promise when we see a nation which is tearing itself apart? God has promised to preserve his Church, that he would keep her safe from generation to generation. Can we still believe that promise when we see churches getting smaller and smaller, and it seems like more and more people are turning away from God? And it doesn't just have to be things that are out there. It can also be our own personal troubles, our own personal struggles. Can we trust God that all things work together for good for those who love him when our lives are rather difficult, when things aren't going the way that we want to? Can we trust God that he will give us peace beyond all understanding when our health is failing and we're really not quite sure how much longer we have? Can we trust God that those who believe in Jesus Christ will live even though they die when we are mourning the death of someone close to us? Can we hold on to those promises? Because when we're in the midst of these things,

Christians, it seems so easy to feel like there is no hope. How can we trust God's promises and trust that they will not fail even when it seems like they are?

But listen to what God says in our reading for today through the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn." God comes to us today to bring us good news, to bring us the good news of the coming year of his favor. Because in the Law God had established what was called the jubilee. Every fifty years, Israel was supposed to keep the jubilee. Leviticus chapter 25 says this: "And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan." So in that year, in the jubilee, all of those who sold property would have it given back to them. In that jubilee year, the poor would be built up. In that jubilee year, slaves would be set free. It was a year of restoration and of liberty. And its purpose was so that no one would ever be cut off from Israel. No one would ever be cut off from the promises of God. It was the way of reassuring Israel that they belonged to him forever.

And now, Christians, that jubilee established in the Law was nothing in comparison with what God now promises. Because in that coming great jubilee, God would give to his people a headdress of joy rather than of ashes. God would give to them the oil of gladness rather than mourning. They would no longer be captive among the nations. They would no longer be cut off. Rather, they would return to the land and have a double portion and an everlasting joy. The nations would come to them, not in war, but in peace. And in that great year, not one promise of God would fail. All would come to pass. Even if they had to wait for it, it would be fulfilled. God would show them his favor when he restored them and built them up once more.

And Christians, this is not something that was just for long ago, a promise that God made to his people back in the Old Testament. This promise is also for us. Because in the Gospel of Luke, we are told, Luke chapter 4, that Jesus went back to his hometown of Nazareth. It was towards the beginning of his ministry. And while he was there, on a Sabbath day he went to the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read and to teach because he was now a teacher. And his reading on that day, all those years ago, was our reading for today: Isaiah 61. Luke chapter 4 says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And when Jesus gave back the scroll, he sat down in preparation to preach. And he opened his mouth, "and he began to say to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" Jesus shows us clearly. He is the fulfillment of what Isaiah promised all those years ago. Jesus is the beginning of the true and the great jubilee. Everything else up to this point looked forward to what has now come in Jesus Christ: the great year of God's favor, the time in which we now live. Because in this time, Christians, those who are bound in sin are being set free. In this time, Christians, we hear the good news of the Gospel. In this time, we know that all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Jesus is the certain and sure proof that God keeps all of his promises. Jesus is the proof that God's favor has come to us. And no matter how hard it seems for God to keep his

promises, he will keep every single one in Jesus Christ, his Son. Because nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

And when this great jubilee is finished, Christians, when the time of the Gospel has come to an end, when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead, all will be fulfilled. Then there will be no more waiting. Then there will be no more suffering, no more pain, no more grief, no more death. Then our joy will never come to an end, because the former things will have passed away!

So Christians, hold on to God's promises. Even when it seems impossible for him to do them, hold on to them. Because all of them find their Yes and their Amen in Jesus Christ, his Son. Even if we have to wait for it, God will do what he says, and we know that because we have his favor through Jesus Christ, his Son.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who binds up the broken hearted and who sets the captives free, strengthen us to always trust in you, because you have the words of truth and life; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.