

So, a vaccine – or rather a few vaccines at this point – have been created. Distribution in Ontario will begin in a matter of days and, if all of the research and testing turn out to be correct, we may soon get to the place where our entire lives are no longer dominated by a tiny little thing called a coronavirus. This is good news, and I realize that it's probably a little bit premature to celebrate too much – certainly far too premature to celebrate with large maskless gatherings – but maybe it is time to at least start thinking about what comes next.

I am sure that some people are expecting that, on the day when it's finally done, the day when enough people are vaccinated and herd immunity is attained, that the crisis will just be over. Everyone will just get up in the morning and go back to living their lives the way that they used to. That is what everyone who lives through a crisis dreams of and it is understandable. Sometimes when you're living through a crisis, the only thing that keeps you going is the thought of getting back to life the way you used to know it. And yet, I think we all realize on some level that that is not all that realistic. Because of the direct and indirect effects of this crisis, there are many things that will simply not go back to the way they were.

We have no idea how many yet, but we can be sure that, when this is over, there will have been many businesses that have long been important parts of our local and national economies that will simply no longer exist. People's savings will have been decimated and their debts will be that much more unmanageable. People will lose their homes or be thrown out of their apartments. People will continue to struggle to find good jobs for some time to come. Women, in particular, seem to have fallen out of the workforce and will face many struggles to get back in.

Oh, the end of the crisis will go just fine for some people: the fortunate few. That is almost always what happens in the aftermath of a crisis. In fact, for those who have the resources and are willing to ruthlessly take advantage of the misery of others, there is a very good chance that they will make enormous profits out of the whole situation. Chances are, when this is all over, there will be a small group that finds themselves greatly richer and there will be a very large group that have simply fallen through the cracks of society and the economy. And the simple fact of the matter is that, when that is the situation, it makes an economic recovery for everyone that much harder. But, that is where we will likely find ourselves in the coming months.

But, of course, we are not the first people in history to face



such a situation. In fact, it is the kind of thing that happens just about every time a society faces a major crisis and then has to recover. Take, for example, the great crisis of the exile for the ancient people of Judah. When their country was destroyed and all the leading citizens were taken away into exile by the Babylonians, well you can just imagine the kind of devastation that caused.

But when that crisis finally came to an end, and the people were able to return from that exile and start all over again, their troubles were hardly over. The country had been ruined. The economy was in shambles. They were trying to rebuild and they had almost no resources to do so.

And, under those circumstances, it was the poorest folk who struggled most of all. They had no savings and they went deep into debt. Meanwhile, the few wealthy people who had returned were in a great position to benefit from the misery of these others. They loaned them money, and then, when they were unable to repay, they seized their lands, if they had any, and then they seized the people themselves and turned them into slaves.

And given that that was the kind of thing that was going on, the economy only got worse and the whole thing was a real mess. As a very few people got very rich and the great mass of the people fell into poverty and slavery, the recovery was looking like a complete disaster.

But then, a prophet came along. And he came along with a stunning message. **“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, Because the LORD has anointed me;”** he cried out in the ruined city. **“He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, To bind up the broken-hearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour.”** And this was not just the ranting of a crazy person, it was actually a plan – a plan for a real recovery.

You see, there was an ancient law in Israel. Every fifty years, all debts had to be forgiven, all lands that had been foreclosed on had to be returned and all debt slaves released. It was called the year of Jubilee. It was a way – admittedly a radical and very disruptive way – but a way of making sure that people didn’t fall into permanent poverty and that the richest people were not able to exploit their misery, at least not forever.

Now, I do hear all of the objections that you are thinking about this idea of a year of Jubilee. I mean, can you imagine the havoc it would wreak in our economy if all debts were forgiven and all sales of land were undone? It is something that is quite unthinkable under our present economic system, though it may have made a bit more sense in the ancient agrarian economy of Israel.

But, even back then, it was likely problematic. So perhaps, many have suggested, the Jubilee was not practiced, at least not on a regular basis. Sure, it was a law, part of the law of Moses, but you can well imagine that it would have taken a strong will on the part of the authorities to make sure that such a law was actually implemented and you can also well imagine that there must have been times when that will was lacking.

And so, in the aftermath of the exile while the people were trying to rebuild their lives in the city of Jerusalem, it had probably been a very long time since there had been the will to hold a year of Jubilee. And there were almost certainly no authorities who would be inclined to implement the ancient law at that moment. And so, guess what happened. A prophet stood up and declared that he didn't care that there was no king or priest or other authority who was going to implement a year of Jubilee.

Why didn't he care? Because the Spirit of the Lord God was upon him. He might have been nobody, he might have had no power at all, but he had God's Spirit and that was enough. And so he would speak up and demand that the Jubilee be proclaimed. And there is no doubt that a Jubilee is what he means when he speaks of, **“good news to the oppressed. . . liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”** It is clearly what he means when he proclaims **“the year of the LORD's favour.”**

And I have a lot of respect for that prophet for having the courage to do such a thing. I don't think I'm the only one. You are probably aware that, according to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus began his public ministry in his own hometown of Nazareth, he did it by taking this very same passage of scripture and applying it to himself, basically saying that he was the fulfillment of the prophecy.

That is to say that Jesus came at a moment in history when the people were facing the same kind of crisis of a country and an economy that were falling apart, this time mostly due to the greed of the Romans. And so, Jesus declared that he would be the embodiment of the same call of the ancient prophet. Though he also had no earthly power to do so, his presence in the world would bring about a new Jubilee.

But it is not something that is just there when Jesus announces it at the beginning of his ministry – it is something that runs through the entire Gospel of Luke, as we see in our reading from the Magnificat this morning. You see Mary doesn't have to wait until Jesus returns to Nazareth to speak in synagogue to know that his mere presence in the world means that the impossible Jubilee is now possible. As soon as she can sense that she is pregnant she sings it: **“He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”**

The mere presence of Jesus in the womb of his mother is enough – the fact that he is coming into the world means that the reality of the world and how it works is being turned upside down and the rich and the powerful are losing their place and the poor, the neglected and the forgotten have taken that exalted place. The unthinkable is happening.

I worry about the recovery after this pandemic, I really do – not because I doubt the ability of medical science and research to come up with a vaccine that will get us out of this mess. I have no worries about that. But I do have worries about human nature and especially that our greed and our selfishness will mean

that whatever wealth is available will stop circulating and remain in the hands of a few and so the recovery will be much less than it could possibly be and that it will leave far too many people behind. I worry because I suspect that our leaders, who, after all, owe so much to the rich and powerful, will not be able to oppose them.

But maybe, if I listen to the Old Testament prophet, if I listen to the mother of Jesus as her hands clutch the life that is just beginning to grow inside her, and if I listen to her son as he stands before the people in Nazareth, I will realize that we don't necessarily need to wait for our leaders to wake up and realize what is actually needed. All it takes is someone who has the Spirit of the Lord upon them. And, my friends, that is and can be any of us.

When you think about it, it is kind of amazing to hear some of the voices that are being raised right now, voices of people who are essentially powerless and who, under normal circumstances, would never be listened to, and yet, those voices are being heard right now even though they are saying things that were previously unthinkable.

I'm talking about people who are saying that maybe it is time to forgive student loan debt. I'm talking about people who are saying, let's take some of that money that has been used to militarize the police and instead redirect it towards mental health and housing and building up social capital. I'm talking about people who are daring to suggest radical ideas like a universal basic income. These words are not coming from the powerful and the influential, and yet they are being heard. I wonder, is it maybe because somehow the spirit of the Lord is behind such ideas right now because that is what is needed?

I don't know. I honestly don't know how much merit is in some of those ideas and whether they will work or not. But I absolutely welcome such voices being heard because I know that we will never get anywhere if we quench the voice of the Spirit of the Lord.

What's more, I believe that we, as people of faith, really ought to be those who are most open to such things because it is right there in the scriptures that we profess to believe. And it is especially there in the story of the incarnation, in the meaning of Jesus coming into the world in the first place, into the body of his mother and into that synagogue at Nazareth. If the spirit of the Lord God is speaking through somebody in the world today, we ought to be the first to rejoice in that.