

## **Together on the Journey - Who Belongs?**

[Isaiah 61, Luke 4:16-21]

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Over the last few weeks, as part of our sermon series here at Toronto United Mennonite Church, we have been reflecting on what it means to journey with God. Today we are invited to continue this reflection through the question, “who belongs on the journey?”

The verses of Isaiah 61:1-2, which Jesus echoes in today’s reading from Luke, are familiar to most Christians:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

Given the familiarity of these words, it can be tempting to simplify the message. The question of “who” may seem obvious. On the surface, at least, we have three key actors: the Instigator, the Messenger and the Receiver who, together, are all a part of this journey.

### **The Instigator**

Our first actor, the Instigator, is clearly identified as the “Spirit of the Lord”. Anointing from the Holy Spirit is what enables action in this passage. The Holy Spirit is the source of the call to action. And there is a lot of action in this passage: to send, to preach, to proclaim, to release, to recover, and to liberate... Choosing “Instigator” as the key subject is deliberate. In my mind, “instigator” echoes the breadth of our triune God, in a very tangible way, and reflects the movement of God’s spirit in this passage. The Dictionary in Google Docs includes the following synonyms, among others, for

“instigator”: prime mover, motivator, author, creator, father, mother, agitator, troublemaker, and agent provocateur.

*The call in this passage is provocative.*

### **The Messenger**

Our second actor, the Messenger, is not clearly stated in the original Old Testament text, but can be “assumed” in both its meanings. In Isaiah, it is “reasonable to suppose” that the messenger is the prophet Isaiah. In Luke, Jesus “takes responsibility and assumes the power” of the Holy Spirit’s anointing to fulfill the action in this passage. Isaiah and Jesus have both received God’s Spirit and are ready to do what they have been called to do—spread hope, healing, and deliverance to those in need. Jesus is the Messenger.

In our reading of these texts, we can often read ourselves into the “me” of the Isaiah text, too. As people who choose to follow Jesus, we align ourselves with the Messenger. The Spirit anoints us for God’s ongoing action in the world. The partnership between the church and God’s Holy Spirit—who anoints and empowers us for this joint mission—continues. This assumption can be good and true AND also lead us to another question as we address the final group of actors in our story.

*The call in this passage is provocative.*

### **The Receivers**

Our remaining actors, the Receivers, are clear on face value:

- The “poor” receive the good news;
- The “prisoners” are released;
- The “blind” recover their sight;
- The “oppressed” are liberated.

It is in reflecting on this third group that we are called into a deeper reading of the text. Who are the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed? How do the poor receive

the good news, how are the prisoners released, how do the blind recover their sight and how are the oppressed liberated?

It can be tempting to limit the reading of this text. From our places of privilege, we can all too often assume that we are the Messenger and, in doing so, we can limit the agency and voice of the Receivers. We can sometimes spiritualize this third group, too, and place ourselves in this role without really digging into what it means to journey with those who are different from us.

God chooses to amplify the Receivers in this text. And we would do well to listen.

*The call in this passage is provocative.*

### **The Call**

To understand how provocative this call is, it is helpful to look at the surrounding verses for each of the Isaiah and the Luke passages and the greater context. As we read further along in Isaiah in verses 3 and 4 and in verses 8 and 9, we hear the prophet's call:

*“to provide for Zion’s mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, planted by the Lord to glorify himself. They will rebuild the ancient ruins; they will restore formerly deserted places; they will renew ruined cities, places deserted in generations past...*

*I, the Lord, love justice; I hate robbery and dishonesty. I will faithfully give them their wage, and make with them an enduring covenant. Their offspring will be known among the nations, and their descendants among the peoples. All who see them will recognize that they are a people blessed by the Lord.”*

These later verses in Isaiah remind us that this passage takes place in a very specific time and context. This is the story of the Jewish people. This is the story of exile and of covenant and of blessing.

AND it is also a story that is bigger than the Jewish people!

When we read further along in Luke 4, we read that the people in the synagogue were initially impressed with Jesus' teaching. But then Jesus reminds those listening that the Receivers include more than the Jewish people as he talks about the widow in Sidon and the cleansing of Namaan the Syrian. In verses 28 and 29, we read, at this point in the story, that the people in the synagogue were angry, ran Jesus out of town, and were ready to throw Jesus off a cliff!

*The call in this passage is provocative.*

## **A New Kingdom**

What is Jesus doing?

Jesus is turning the notion of "kingdom" upside down and redefining what "good news" means by radically redefining the Receiver in God's story. The Receiver is not just those that are marginalized at the edges of the Jewish community, but also includes the enemy group of the Gentiles!

When we hear the term "good news" we often equate that to the Church's mission to preach the gospel, to tell people about Jesus' teachings, and to invite people into relationship with Jesus. In today's readings, "To preach the good news" is paralleled with "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor". This proclamation is a radical reference to Jubilee, which was a very concrete form of reconciliation. Jubilee was a time where relationships were made right. Slaves were set free and debts were cancelled. Two key terms: relationship and reconciliation.

In his book “Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians” John Paul Lederach invites us to look at the gospel through the lens of reconciliation. He asserts that “reconciliation *is* the gospel.” He describes his understanding of Christ’s good news to both the Jews and Gentiles in this way while reflecting on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

*“through Christ, through a person who reaches out across lines of hostility, though his very flesh and person, enemies meet and are held together. Thus they form a new humanity, a new relationship...”*

*From the perspective of God’s purpose, the example of Christ Jesus is clear. It is not possible to pursue reconciliation except through people who risk the journey to relate across the social divides. In this way they help make present the reconciling love of God.”*

So who belongs on the journey?

*The call in this passage is provocative.*

To be sent “to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” inherently implies a relationship. And relationships go two ways.

So, who are the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed? How do the poor receive the good news, how are the prisoners released, how do the blind recover their sight and how are the oppressed liberated?

### **Some Stories of Reconciliation**

To help us reflect on these questions, I’d like to share some stories arising from the work of Mennonite Central Committee. I have been a long-term MCC supporter and am currently serving on the boards for both MCC Ontario and MCC Canada.

For many in the congregation, Mennonite Central Committee will be familiar. To those of you who are MCC supporters, thank-you; For those who may be new to MCC,

*Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) is a worldwide ministry of Anabaptist churches that shares God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ by responding to basic human needs and working for peace and justice.*

In 2023, I had the opportunity to travel to Ethiopia as part of a MCC Leadership Learning Tour. One of MCC Ethiopia's partners is the Meserete Kristos Church, also known as MKC. MKC is the Mennonite church in Ethiopia and is the largest single national Mennonite church worldwide that is affiliated with Mennonite World Conference.

During the tour, we travelled up into the mountains to Debre Birhan, which is in the North Shewa region of Amhara. This region has a rich cultural heritage, with a deep sense of pride and honour, which is good and bad. The dreadful side of the local culture is known as "Black Blood", a cycle of revenge killings that devastates communities and displaces families who relocate to get away from the violence. In Debre Birhan, we visited the North Shewa prison. This prison houses 1800 men, with most of the inmates doing time for murder.

At the time of the learning tour, MKC was present in 37 prisons across Ethiopia and employed 73 full time chaplains who visited the prisons daily. At the North Shewa prison, we had the opportunity to see just how multi-faceted this prison ministry is: from peace training for community members to vocational training for inmates. MKC's goal of breaking the cultural cycle of violence is grounded in the mission to preach the gospel and transform lives. I want to share the stories of three men who we met at the prison – Zeyna, Zewdie and Zork:.

**Zeyna**, pictured on the left, is a high school student. He is secretary of his school's Peace Club and was one of about 12 youth visiting the prison to participate in reconciliation training being offered as part of MKC's prison ministry. Zeyna shared how

the three ethnic groups in his region and the various religious groups including Christians and Muslims work together to practice reconciliation. Zeyna is committed to seeing peace restored in Ethiopia and believes that students, like him, can bring change.

**Zewdie**, in the centre, is an elder in his community and volunteers his time to serve on his district's Village Peace Committee in response to the instability and insecurity in the region. He was one of about 60 other leaders, from 10 districts, who gathered to refresh their skills as intermediaries between victims and offenders.

Village Peace Committee leaders, like Zewdie, work with offenders who have taken responsibility for their actions and with families who want to reconcile and offer forgiveness. The reconciliation process is rooted in the rituals of the region. It is an iterative process and takes time. The work of the Village Peace Committees has real, meaningful results with over 250 victims and offenders being reconciled yearly throughout the prison system. Reconciliation results in reduced sentences and reintegration of offenders back into communities.

Zeyna and Zewdie both work for peace in their communities in different contexts. The purpose of the Peace Clubs is prevention, to work at changing the culture before the violence starts. Peace Clubs work to introduce change before reconciliation is needed. The purpose of the Village Peace Committees is rooted in reconciliation. These committees actively respond to the violence and work to break the cycle of revenge killings. MKC's annual joint training session brings together youth from the high school Peace Clubs with community elders from the Village Peace Committees so that they can learn from each other and better understand how each group is working for peace. The last person from the prison that I want to introduce you to is Zork.

**Zork**, pictured on the right, is an inmate who was incarcerated for murder. While we heard the specifics of some of the inmate's stories, we did not hear Zork's. At 20 years old, he was the average age of the 1800 men who are imprisoned at North Shewa.

As part of the prison ministry, MKC provides vocational training for inmates. They provide training in skills such as church planting, welding, woodworking and sewing to help inmates, like Zork, reintegrate into society after their release. Zork was able to learn woodworking through the supplies and training made possible with contributions from MKC and was already making tangible connections in the community using his woodworking skills, while he was still in prison.

Zork also successfully participated in the reconciliation process. Zork and his victim's family journeyed through the process of reconciliation together. When we met, Zork was on track to be released in September 2023. While a typical sentence for murder is 12 years to life, it is not uncommon to see offenders who have reconciled with their victims' families, serving half the minimum sentence.

This reconciliation work of relationship building across social divides is having real, tangible results in Ethiopia.

Here in Ontario, MCC's reconciliation work looks different, but has equally meaningful results. The following story was shared by Michelle Brenneman, MCCO's Executive Director, at last year's annual general meeting in September.

The rising cost of living, the urgent lack of affordable housing, the influx of hard street drugs and the resulting strain on marginalized folks have led to unique challenges for retail spaces in downtown neighbourhoods like MCC Thrift on Kent in Kitchener. As incidences of theft and altercations increased, MCCO wondered how peacebuilding and shop security might weave together in a creative response to this challenge.

The Community Safety and Outreach program was introduced as a peacebuilding initiative that aims to build relationships with marginalized individuals in the Kitchener community surrounding our building at 50 Kent. As the Community Safety and Outreach Associate, Stephen's primary goal is to foster connections, treat every person with dignity and respect, and create bridges between those on the margins and the thrift



shop. During 2024, he connected with over 300 individuals, making a meaningful impact in the community.

One such person is Rico, a regular at Thrift on Kent who Stephen got to know.

One day last summer, Stephen saw Rico smoking a cigarette at the edge of the 50 Kent property. After walking over to ask how he was doing, Rico took a long drag from his smoke, exhaled, and said: “Actually, things aren’t going well for me today. I’m really concerned about my mother. We live in a tent together and she’s up all hours of the night talking to the radio and people that aren’t there. I don’t know how to help her, but I know she needs help. I tried to get her admitted to a facility last year but that didn’t end up happening. We’ve been living together in the bush ever since. I’m 29 years old, I want to move on with my life.”

After affirming the heaviness of his situation, Stephen offered to connect Rico with an Unsheltered Support Worker from the Region of Waterloo, whose job is to help people living rough find transitional housing. A couple of days later, Stephen was able to facilitate that meeting at the Thrift on Kent shop, connecting Rico and his mom to resources that could help.

This local story is an example of the peacebuilding-reconciling-potential of this unique initiative.

### **Receivers as Messengers**

In our scripture passages today and in the MCC stories of reconciliation, the Receivers are not passive recipients, but are active agents in the Instigator’s story. The Receivers are also the Messengers.

On a mountain in Debre Birhan, we met Jesus at a prison. We met Jesus through those community members on the edge of violence working at prevention and reconciliation. We met Jesus in Zeyna and Zewdie. We met Jesus through those enmeshed in the violence, including in the offender. We met Jesus in Zork.

At a thrift store in Kitchener, we can also encounter Jesus. We encounter Jesus in Stephen building relationships with the unsheltered. We also encounter Jesus through a son caring for his mother. We encounter Jesus in Rico.

*The call in this passage is provocative.*

God, through the Holy Spirit, the Instigator, calls us as Receivers to God's self, to be reconciled, and to live into God's upside down kingdom, where those on the margins are the Messengers that show us the way to Jesus. Jesus, the eternal Messenger, promises us that we are ALL God's children. To believe in Jesus and to work for reconciliation is to answer God's provocative call and move into deeper relationship with each other. And, by doing so, live into the dream described in our opening hymn, *"the day when earth and heaven are one, a city built of love and light, the new Jerusalem."* [VT 6]

Let's close with a prayer from another hymn, which we will sing shortly. Our closing hymn, "We Your People Sing Your Praises", was co-written by a long term MCCer, Rebecca Mosley. Rebecca and her husband, Paul, were the country reps in Ethiopia when I travelled there in 2023 and are currently serving as MCC country reps for Kenya and Tanzania, based out of Nairobi.

I encourage you to listen for and lift up this prayer as we sing:

*"Give us courage for the journey, shepherd Jesus be our guide. Help us to lead with hope and passion till all things are reconciled." [VT 849]*