

Dear Friends, I do hope you are well. You and yours are in our prayers.

I am terribly excited to be speaking out about Jubilee, an idea whose time has come. Below is the full manuscript for Sunday's message. There is no way I am delivering all of it! Lord, have mercy on the speaker and the hearer!

To catch the real (more pithy!) thing, go to our Facebook page: First Christian Church of Decatur Facebook. The worship service is live streamed at 10:30 AM, and afterward is posted on YouTube, as well.

May the blessings and peace of Christ be with you. Shalom, James

“The Genuineness of Faith”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 26, 2020

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Luke 4: 16-21

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

1 Peter 1: 3-6, 17-23

³ Blessed be the God and [Creator] of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

⁶ In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷ so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

¹⁷ If you invoke as [Creator] the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile. ¹⁸ You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ²⁰ He was destined before the foundation of the world but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. ²¹ Through him you have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set on God.

²² Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. ²³ You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. ²⁴ For

“All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers and the flower falls,
²⁵ but the word of the Lord endures forever.”

Anthem: "Pie Jesus"

On behalf of all of us at First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia,
our congregation thanks you, Allison and Kathy.
When music originates in our souls and moves outward, as your's does,
it communicates God's love, touching the holy in all of us.

*Pie Jesu Domine,
Dona eis requiem (sempiternam).*

Which translates as:

*Merciful Jesus
Grant them rest (everlasting)*

We lift our hearts and minds to a merciful Jesus, our sweet everlasting Jesus:

Grant us rest, grant us peace, grant us mercy.
Give us Your strength, capacity and will to rise,
to rise to the occasion, to rise up
and live to the fullest genuineness of our faith
in such a time as this.

Speak to us a word of hope.
Tell us, teach us, empower us to...

Rise Up

“Rise Up!” is the Atlanta Falcons a rallying cry.
How many times have we heard Samuel L. Jackson implore Atlanta, saying:

“What do Falcons do? We rise up!”

The actor known in these parts for his inspiring role in those “Rise Up” commercials
once worked for the team.

Samuel L. Jackson said on “Jimmy Kimmel Live”

“I went to college in Atlanta.

When I was at Morehouse [College] the Falcons came to town.

I used to work at the stadium.

I used to sell hot dogs, burgers, fries.”

Remember that next time you go to Mercedes Benz Stadium.

We don't know when--or whether--there will be a 2020 season in the Benz;
we do know the good news is

so far this year the Falcons are undefeated.

This weekend featured the NFL Draft.

The Draft is a "mind-expansion exercise,
making hitherto unthinkable solutions thinkable."

The NFL Draft is when every team and fan base share this hope, this expectation
that they may gain enough new talent and starters

to turn from being average to great,
transformed from a pretender into a contender.

Rise Up

For a long time this was how I approached Christian spirituality.

God, please transform us from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

For a significant part of my journey my theological starting point was that

God gifted the Holy Spirit to transform us from being average to becoming great,
to lift us from the ordinary to the extraordinary.

For example, the way I heard Jesus of Nazareth's first sermon,

when He walked into his home congregation and preached,
delivering a Word to inform them – us! –

that God's love has come on earth from the heavens above
to point us in the right direction.

But what if – bear with me now – what if we already have that moral compass within?

What if we are already extraordinary, but haven't been trusting what is within us?

Rebecca Solnit asks:

*"What if everything we've been told about human nature is wrong,
and we're actually very generous, communitarian, altruistic beings
who are distorted by the system we're in but not made happy by it?*

*What if we are [already blessed from the beginning,
Original Blessings created by God]*

to actually be better people in a better world?" (Rebecca Solnit)

When disasters threaten to destroy,

the best – or the worst – of human nature rises up. (Amen!)

We ask ourselves and one another

what do you think God planted within us, for such a time as this?

"The coronavirus outbreak is serving as a mind-expansion exercise,
making hitherto unthinkable solutions thinkable." --Michael Hudson

How does it reshape, reorient our reading of Scriptures and journey with the Holy Spirit
if our starting point is that

God already planted the Holy Spirit within us,
before we were formed, before birth, molding our clay-like souls,
so that when we emerge from the womb bruised, beautiful,
bawling, stretching, thirsting for milk and human warmth,
announcing our presence with our first breath,
the resurrecting power of God is simultaneously announcing to the world,
“Here we are, world, hear us roar.
We shall walk and talk, roar and soar, cry and fly.

We rise!

So, my friends, my extraordinary friends,
when Jesus of Nazareth walked into his home congregation and preached,
the Word He spoke was less a sharing of biblical information
and so much more a call to action, a divine reminder to humanity
of our mandate, one we’ve had within us all along.
Listen again to Christ’s message, not as information for information’s sake;
Listen to Jesus’s Word as a reminder to that which we have already
been called and commissioned by the One Who Created and Creates:

*He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.
He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

Then he began to say to them,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Hear Christ’s message as one that taps into the innermost core of your being.
The Gospel of God’s love is intensely personal, yet simultaneously holding us to
communal accountability.

You know, O beloved people of God, what is expected of you, said Micah.

Rise Up

Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with your God.

Jesus went with Isaiah:

Rise Up

Bring good news to the poor.

Release the captives.

Overcome the blindness in and around us.

Liberate the oppressed.

Proclaim the acceptable year, the year of Jubilee.

Hold on to that one, 'cause we're coming right back to unpack Jubilee.

We who claim the name Christian,
we who take on the mantle of Disciples of Christ,
we who wonder about this Jesus fellow and want to know more,
we who are haunted by the idea, the concept, the inkling
that there might be a God,
find that this call to serve in the here and now is fermenting within us,
re-awaking a Word that has been dormant for too darn long.

As they say, denial is not a river in Egypt.
We cannot pawn this one off on Jesus of Nazareth, saying this mandate is His alone.
We cannot push it aside, saying maybe later, maybe tomorrow, maybe someone else.
We cannot deny that this Word, His Word, is our Word.

Reminds me of the cartoon of the science laboratory.
The sign on the door reads Research and Development.
The room is crammed with filing cabinets, each overflowing with papers.
People in lab coats are standing around, holding clipboards,
when a scientist runs inside and shouts, *"Enough research! Start development!"*

In other words: ***Rise Up!***

When Jesus proclaimed the acceptable year, the year of Jubilee,
He then said the Word was fulfilled in our hearing.
Well, let's start development.
Let's get to it, proclaiming the acceptable year.
Interestingly, an economist wrote an op-ed piece that ran in the Washington Post.
Did you see it?
Michael Hudson is a distinguished professor of economics
at the University of Missouri in Kansas City.
Michael Hudson sees a way out of the economic morass we find ourselves in.
He's letting his faith and his brains and his love for humanity speak up and speak out.
Jesus' idea has bubbled up within and is being set loose.

Proclaim the acceptable year, the year of Jubilee.

"The word "Jubilee" comes from the Hebrew word for "trumpet" — yobel.^[1]
In Mosaic Law, it was blown every 50 years
to signal the Year of the Lord,
in which personal debts were to be canceled.
The alternative, the prophet Isaiah warned,
was for smallholders to forfeit their lands to creditors:
"Woe to you who add house to house and join field to field
till no space is left and you live alone in the land."

When Jesus delivered his first sermon,
the Gospel of Luke describes him as unrolling the scroll of Isaiah
and announcing that he had come to proclaim the Year of the Lord,
the Jubilee Year.

Until recently, historians doubted that a debt jubilee
would have been possible in practice,
or that such proclamations could have been enforced.

[However] Assyriologists have found that
from the beginning of recorded history in the Near East,
it was normal for new rulers to proclaim a debt amnesty
upon taking the throne.

[We have seen Jubilee work in modern times as well.]

After World War II,
Germans called an “Economic Miracle” their own modern debt jubilee in 1948.
When the Allied Powers introduced the Deutsche Mark, replacing the Reichsmark,
90 percent of government and private debt was wiped out.
Germany emerged as an almost debt-free country,
with low costs of production that jump-started its modern economy.
For decades now Germany has been an international economic powerhouse.

Let’s look closer to home.

In 2008, America’s bank crash offered a great opportunity [to free debts,]
to write down the often-fraudulent junk mortgages
that burdened many lower-income families, especially minorities.

But this was not done,
and millions of American families were evicted.

[We missed the opportunity,
deciding to bail out banks and savings and loans,
rather than the 10 million families who lost their homes.]

Now is the time to hit the mark, to help each other to **Rise Up**

“The coronavirus outbreak is serving as a mind-expansion exercise,
making hitherto unthinkable solutions thinkable.

The way to restore normalcy today, writes Hudson, is a debt write-down.”

It’s pragmatic, helping the whole economy, as well as the less affluent.

“The debts in deepest arrears and most likely to default
are student debts, medical debts, general consumer debts
and purely speculative debts.

They block spending on goods and services,
shrinking the “real” economy.”

Hudson acknowledges that “critics warn of a creditor collapse

and ruinous costs to government.
But if the U.S. government can finance \$4.5 trillion in quantitative easing,
it can absorb the cost of forgoing student and other debt.
And for private lenders, only bad loans need be wiped out.
Much of what would be written off are accruals, late charges
and penalties on loans gone bad.
Until now, the basic ethic of most of us
has been that debts must be repaid. [Right? That's only fair, we say.]
But it is time to recognize that most debts
now cannot be paid — through no real fault of the debtors
in the face of today's economic disaster.
Debts that can't be paid won't be.
A debt jubilee may be the best way out."

Rise Up

The Early Church was suffering, living in harsh and oppressive times,
clinging to hope and one another.
The Good News came to them in words of affirmation and inspiration,
reminding them of the goodness and power that emanates from within:
*"In this you rejoice,
even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials,
so that the genuineness of your faith—
being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—
may be found to result in praise and glory and honor
when Jesus Christ is revealed.
...If you invoke as [Creator]
the one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds,
live in reverent fear during the time of your exile." 1 Peter 1: 6-7, 17*

They rose to the creation.
2,000 years later we give thanks to the genuineness of their faith.
The Good News is that we're witnessing so many neighbors rising to the occasion.
We live in a resurrection-drenched world, a world drenched with grace,
a world in which people are stepping up & stepping out to love one another.

Alicia Keys' song "Underdog" tells a story, our story, of embodying this mandate.

"Underdog" By: Alicia Keys and Friends ^[2]
*He was nameless, he was homeless
She asked him his name and told him what hers was
He gave her a story 'bout a life
With a glint in his eye and a corner of a smile
One conversation, a simple moment
The things that change us if we notice
When we look up, sometimes*

*They said I would never make it
But I was built to break the mold
The only dream that I've been chasing is my own
So I sing a song for the hustlers trading at the bus stop
Single mothers waiting on a check to come
Young teachers, student doctors
Sons on the frontline knowing they don't get to run
This goes out to the underdog
Keep on keeping at what you love
You'll find that someday soon enough
You will rise up, rise up, yeah*

Rise to the Occasion

Last Sunday our Outreach Ministry team checked in with each other over Zoom. Our fearless coordinator Ruth Lutz opened with a reading from Krista Tippet's podcast NPR interview with Rebecca Solnit. [Rebecca Solnit, author of Falling Together, Original NPR Air Date May 26, 2016].

Rebecca Solnit shared her wisdom, saying: ^[3]

*“...there's a way a disaster throws people into the present
and sort of gives them this supersaturated immediacy
that also includes a deep sense of connection.
It's as though in some violent gift
you've been given a kind of spiritual awakening
where you're close to mortality
in a way that makes you feel more alive;
you're deeply in the present
and can let go of past and future and your personal narrative,
in some ways.
You have shared an experience with everyone around you,
and you often find very direct,
but also metaphysical senses of connection to the people
you suddenly have something in common with.
“And then oftentimes,
the people who do the really important work in disasters,
which doesn't get talked about much,
are the neighbors.
Whose going to rescue you when your building collapses?
When the ice storm comes, and the power goes out?
It's probably going to be the neighbors.
“And so the question is really...two things.
One is how can we get there without going through a disaster.
“And then the other question is:
Why has everything we've ever been told about human nature
misled us about what happens in these moments?”*

*“And what happens if we acknowledge,
as I think people in the kind of work that neuropsychologists
and the Dalai Lama’s research projects and economists
are beginning to say,
what if everything we’ve been told about human nature is wrong,
and we’re actually very generous, communitarian, altruistic beings
who are distorted by the system we’re in
but not made happy by it?
What if we can actually be better people in a better world?”*

An Arising

Governor Cuomo said, “...you see people who you didn't expect anything from who just rise to the occasion, and you see the best and you see the worst. You just see the best and the worst of humanity, just comes up to the surface on both ends. It just, everything gets elevated, the strength in people and the weakness in people, the beauty in people and the ugliness in people - you see both. For me, the beauty you see and the strength that you see compensates and balances for the weakness. And I get inspired by the strength so I can tolerate the heartbreak of the weakness.

Here is a letter that I received that just sums it up.

‘Dear Mr. Cuomo, I seriously doubt that you will ever read this letter as I know you are busy beyond belief with a disaster that has befallen our country. We are a nation in crisis, of that there is no doubt. I’m a retired farmer hunkered down in northeast Kansas with my wife who has but one lung and occasional problems with her remaining lung. She also has diabetes. We are in our seventies now and frankly I am afraid for her.

Enclosed, find a solitary N95 mask, left over from my farming days. It has never been used. If you could, would you please give this mask to a nurse or doctor in your state. I have kept four masks for my immediate family. Please keep on doing what you do so well. Which is to lead. Sincerely, Dennis and Sharon.’

You want to talk about a snapshot of humanity?

You have five masks. What do you do?

You keep all five? Do you hide the five masks?

Do you keep them for yourselves or others?

No, you send one mask one mask to New York to help a nurse or a doctor.

How beautiful is that? I mean how selfless is that? How giving is that?

You know that’s the nursing home in Niskayuna that sent one hundred ventilators down to New York City when they needed them.

It’s that love that courage that generosity of spirit that makes this country so beautiful.

And makes Americans so beautiful, and it’s that generosity of spirit, for me, makes up for all the ugliness that you see.

Take one mask, I’ll keep four.

God bless America.

Still I Rise By: Maya Angelou (1928-2014) ^[4]

*You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.
Does my sassiness upset you?
Why are you beset with gloom?
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells
Pumping in my living room.
Just like moons and like suns,
With the certainty of tides,
Just like hopes springing high,
Still I'll rise.
Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?
Does my haughtiness offend you?
Don't you take it awful hard
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines
Diggin' in my own backyard.
You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.
Does my sexiness upset you?
Does it come as a surprise
That I dance like I've got diamonds
At the meeting of my thighs?
Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise*

*Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] **“Corona Debt Jubilee”** By Michael Hudson, Sunday, March 22, 2020. *Cross posted from the [Washington Post](#). Michael Hudson, author of “... and forgive them their debts” and “Killing the Host,” is president of the Institute for the Study of Long-Term Economic Trends and is distinguished research professor of economics at the University of Missouri at Kansas City.*

^[2] “Underdog” Written By: Jonny Coffey, Johnny McDaid, Foy Vance, Edward Sheeran, Amy Victoria Wadge, Alicia (Alicia Keys) Augello Cook.

^[3] Krista Tippett’s podcast NPR interview with Rebecca Solnit. National Public Radio. Original Air Date May 26, 2016. Rebecca Solnit is the author of [Falling Together](#).

^[4] From *And Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.