Here we are, in church, at the beginning of another week, and the beginning of another year. What are we doing here?

Have you ever asked yourself that question? Why do you come to church every Sunday? Why do you sing the songs, or choose not to sing? Why do you put money in the offering plate, or choose not to? Why do you take the elements of communion when they are served, or not? What are you doing here?

For those watching this at home, why are you watching? Why do you tune in to a worship service while sitting in your room at home?

I’ve asked myself these questions once in a while. Why do I stand up here on Sunday morning and preach a sermon week after week? Why do I come here to read verses of the Bible and pray in front of a group of people each week? What am I doing here?

What are we doing here? Do we come to worship to make ourselves feel good, earn a few brownie points with God, and let others see that we are good, Christian people? Do we come to worship to praise God for an hour, listen to his Word and hope the minister has a decent sermon that makes me feel good, or one that is a bit challenging? Then, maybe, we can remember something of what he said if someone asks us on Tuesday what the sermon was about.

Are we here so that we get some help to get by in the world, to survive another week? It’s a bit like a fuel stop; we’re here for a weekly fill-up. Or like a stop at our favourite coffee shop; we’re here for a bit of a jolt or a boost.

So, about now you might be thinking: enough questions already. Maybe you are expecting me to give you the answer to all those questions. Or, at about this point in the sermon, you figure that this is where I’m going to tell you why you are here, or why you should be here, or what the “right answer” is to the question.

But that’s one thing I have figured out about why I am here. I’m not here to tell you what to do. I’m not here to tell you how to think. I’m here to help us look together at God’s longing for a world as it could be. I’m here to help us understand God’s intention for our lives and for our world. From what I read in the Bible, I am convinced that we do not come here,
first of all, for our own benefit. One reason that we are gathered in worship is to be invited to
honour God and we do that when we love and pursue the things God loves and pursues.
Those things include justice and mercy.

God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. The gospel is the story of salvation,
forgiveness, a restored relationship with God. But this is not just for individuals; it’s not just
about ‘God and me.’

God so loved the world. God’s desire is to restore and heal brokenness for all people,
including the family in line at the Food Bank, the teen afraid to go to school because of bullies,
the trans-gender adult facing rejection. The gospel is about more than saving souls to get
people to heaven. It’s about bringing God’s love and healing to a broken world. It’s also
about justice and mercy.

Jesus said this as he answered the question of why he was here on earth during his
first sermon in his hometown of Nazareth. As an honoured guest at the synagogue worship
on that particular Sabbath, he was invited to read from the scroll, the Bible. Whether it was
the assigned passage for the day, or a passage he chose, we don’t know for sure. We know
that he read the words of Isaiah 61, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me...to preach good news to
the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.” When he sat down, as was the custom for the rabbi
when he would move from reading to teaching, Jesus proclaimed this prophecy to be fulfilled.
These words were a statement of why Jesus was here.

Jesus was here to make things right in the world. Jesus was here to challenge injustice
for the poor, for prisoners, the blind and the oppressed. Jesus was here to live out God’s
desire for things being just and right.

God loves justice. God has a heart for justice. God is devoted to justice. And by justice,
we’re not just talking about the stuff that happens in a court room, where a wrongdoer gets the
punishment they deserve.

The justice to which God is devoted is much bigger than that. In Isaiah 61, we also
hear the word “righteousness,” which is often used along with justice. This gives the idea that
justice is right living, doing the right thing, going the right way. The picture we saw during
Advent from Isaiah 11, and the picture in Isaiah 61 is a picture of shalom, an overarching
peace in creation and relationships. It is the picture of restoring what is broken, of challenging
that which does the breaking, of bringing healing to those who are hurt.

Jesus, in quoting Isaiah 61, refers to “the year of the Lord’s favour.” This is often understood as referring to the Year of Jubilee, the 50th year, after 7 sabbath years. (Every 7 years was a sabbath, after the 7th sabbath or year 49, there was the Year of Jubilee, the 50th year.) This was a year of rest for the land, forgiving debts, freeing slaves, restoring relationships.

This is what Isaiah is talking about. The poor whose lives have for so long been filled with nothing but bad news get the gift of good news. Those long held captive in dungeons and prisons of all kinds get promised their freedom. Those who for years have spent so many days dampening handkerchiefs with their tears get comforted and pointed toward a day of smiles and laughter. Ashes get blown away to make way for glittering crowns. The drab clothing of mourning get replaced with festive and colourful garments fit for a really great party. People who for too long have felt like useless, dead sticks are promised that they will soon stand as tall and sturdy as the grandest oak tree.

This is more than just using the words of Isaiah 61 or Luke 4 to simply urge us to volunteer for a day, or to give more money to the budget or a particular cause, or to sign a petition, or to share a startling fact on Facebook. God’s call on us means combining his command to do justice and love mercy with a whole life of spiritual depth and integrity.

This is more than spending an hour or so in a worship service once a week, and another hour in Bible study. God’s desire for justice is lived out beyond the walls of this building, in everything we do. Justice is not just some new action to get involved in once in a while. After all, we’re too busy to do one more thing. Where would we ever fit that into our busy schedule? In fact, justice is about aligning what we do already with the values of God’s rule, God’s intention for creation and relationships.

Think about it this way: after we wake up in the morning, how many decisions do we make? We decide what clothes to wear, what food to eat, whether to make a coffee or buy one on the way to work, how to treat our friends, family, and strangers, what to pray for, where to invest our money, and so on. Biblical justice isn’t an action once a year, or something new for a new year. It is a lifestyle. Everyday actions are infused with God’s revelation and intention for justice, with God’s desire for the world to be a place where all is just and right. We are called to live justly.
Hearing the words of Isaiah 61, and hearing them quoted by Jesus as defining his purpose, we come to see that the reason we are here is much larger than to simply satisfy my needs. It’s much more than trying to get more bodies in our pews. It’s much more than singing some songs and saying some prayers once a week.

It’s about welcoming and embracing the stranger, not just so she will become a member of our church, but out of regard for who she is and her need for hospitality. It’s not about whether or not we sing enough of my favourite songs. It’s about considering how the marginalized in society are given a legitimate place. It’s about living and celebrating God’s work of renewal of creation and people’s live. It’s about understanding more of God’s vision for a world where we strive for making things right.

What are we doing here as we celebrate communion? Do we come to the table to get a nourishment of our own faith, so we know that all is well between me and God? Do we come to the table, recognizing the body of Christ in the fellowship of believers? Do we come to the table, recognizing the story of broken bread and a cup as pointing to the sacrifice of Jesus, so that all people can be restored in their relationship with God, not just me? For God so loved the world. When we come to the table, do we hunger for others to join us? For others to know the story? For others to know the healing relationship of grace? Does our participation at the table inspire us and send us out to live this forgiveness, this healing, this invitation to our neighbours and co-workers?

The justice and right living of Isaiah 61, of Jesus’ ministry, is not something limited to an hour on Sunday morning. It’s every day, all around us. Over the next couple of months, we’ll be looking at some specific areas of living God’s justice. We’ll look at our involvement in the structure of society, in our choices as consumers, in our generosity and relationships.

Ask yourself the question, “What am I doing here?” How far-reaching is your answer, beyond yourself? Where does justice fit into your answer?

Ask yourself another question: What is going on in our community or in the world that makes you want to say, “Enough already. It’s not right.” How does that align with God’s desire for justice and right living? How can your time in worship encourage and inspire a life of just action?

Ask the questions. Let God’s Word and Spirit lead you to answers.

To God be the glory! Amen.