

The Mission Statement

January 27, 2019

[Scripture Focus: Luke 4: 14 - 21]

SCRIPTURE

Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit. News that he was back spread through the countryside. He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure.

He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written,

“God’s Spirit is on me; he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free to announce, “This is God’s year to act!”

He rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, “You’ve just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.”

Honestly, I’ve struggled a bit this week with this text. I just wasn’t sure where I was going with it! So, I’m going to start off by trying my best to explain what the text says.

In verses 14 - 16, we hear...

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 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,

In verses 14 -16, we learn that Jesus had been filled with the Holy Spirit and was teaching in various synagogues. He ended up in Nazareth (where he grew up) and as was His custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. This is also where we get the first report of people being amazed by what Jesus has to say.

Early in his adult life, Jesus moved from Nazareth to Capernaum, so his visit to Nazareth is just that: a visit. However, it is the visit of a hometown boy made good. Some people were likely proud of him; others curious; others dismissive or jealous.

Luke established Jesus' deep rootedness in Jewish religious tradition and his faithfulness to the synagogue and Sabbath observance. The center of Jewish worship historically was the temple in Jerusalem. However, during the Babylonian Exile, Jews established local synagogues so that they might worship regularly.

With the circumcision, purification and presentation in the temple and the annual visits to the temple, Luke has established that Mary and Joseph were observant of Jewish religious traditions. They surely raised Jesus in the synagogue, connecting him with Jewish tradition in a way that made the synagogues a natural starting place for his ministry. Their faithfulness in raising Jesus within this tradition helped to shape the person that he was, and is an important part of our salvation history.

In verses 16 - 19, we hear...

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, 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."

When Jesus stood up to read, this was our oldest detailed account of synagogue worship. The language would have been Aramaic, the language of ordinary Jewish people during Jesus' lifetime. A portion of the Torah would be read in Hebrew, and an explanation would be given in Aramaic, followed by a reading from the Prophets with explanation. Other elements of worship would include the recitation of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:49), the Eighteen Benedictions, a psalm, and a benediction.

In the synagogue, there was no professional clergy. The president of the synagogue would have invited someone to comment on the scriptures. While the people would have been biblically literate, most commentary would probably be rote recitation of lessons learned in synagogue school. The main question would be whether the reader will get it right.

The main suspense would be whether someone will have to correct him. When Jesus speaks, it is a very different experience, because he speaks with authority.

When we hear that “Jesus came to bring good news to the poor;” Are they talking about spiritual or economic poverty? Jesus is almost certainly talking about outsiders, people of low status, vulnerable people; whether their problems stem from economic poverty or other causes. Jesus has a mission to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, categories that indicate the breadth of his concern for people in need.

We’re told that Jesus is “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Isaiah wrote these words originally as encouragement for Jewish people in exile. The salvation of which Isaiah spoke is now to be found in Jesus.

These Isaiah verses give Jesus his commission (his mission statement; his guiding beacon). Isaiah 61 is a servant song and proclaims that the Messiah will bring relief to the disenfranchised. This is also the church’s commission. From Luke through Acts, we’ll see Jesus and the church bringing good news, proclaiming release, restoring sight and freeing the oppressed. It’s also our commission. Jesus calls his church to love the unloveable and to serve the undeserving. It is not a comfortable discipleship.

The good news is not the exclusive possession of the poor, the blind, and the oppressed. They will, however, hear the Gospel more gladly than others, because they have much to gain and little to lose. The status quo has no hold on them. The rich, the powerful, and those who perceive themselves to see clearly, will not be as receptive. They will, in fact,

be the ones who kill Jesus. In this Gospel, Jesus will speak often about rich people. With the exception of Zacchaeus, such references are negative. Jesus will warn: “For it is easier for a camel to enter in through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.

Finally, in verses 20 and 21, we hear...

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.”

Jesus read the scripture and then sat down. In the synagogue service, people would stand to read the scriptures and sit to teach.

Jesus’ begins preaching with the word “Today.”

- *Today* the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
- *Today* I bring good news to the poor.
- *Today* I proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.
- *Today* I let the oppressed go free to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

This is one of the world’s shortest sermons, but it packs lots of punch. The people of Israel have waited for centuries for the fulfillment of the promises that God made throughout their history, beginning with Abraham (in Genesis 12). Now Jesus declares that the wait is over; the day has come; promises are fulfilled! This is indeed good news!

The fulfillment of this scripture began with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus but continues in the life of the church today. All over the world, the church is bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, helping the blind to recover their sight, helping to free the oppressed, and proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor. Whether championing human rights or providing relief funds for hurricane victims or drilling a well

for the people of a primitive village or training indigenous people for ministry, the church is helping Jesus to fulfill what he identified in these verses as a core part of his mission.

SO WHAT?

Don't forget that Mary and Joseph provided an excellent model for us to follow in raising our own children. Parents who bring newborn babies to the sanctuary for worship in car seats do a good thing! They come to church against the odds, because it is not easy to get themselves, the baby, and the necessary paraphernalia ready for church. During worship, the baby will sometimes distract the parents. They're tempted to ask if it's worth it, but the truth is that parents who worship regularly give their children a great faith-advantage. The baby who becomes accustomed to church in infancy is likely to enjoy strong faith as an adult.

While the people of Nazareth will ultimately reject Jesus' gospel because his vision extends to Gentiles as well as Jews, if one were to select one foundational piece of scripture to build an understanding of what Jesus did or why it was important, God's Word in Luke 4: 14 - 21 is very helpful. Jesus came to restore the sight of the blind, but the people of Nazareth insist on preserving their narrow vision...

NOW WHAT?

So, what do we do with this text? How does it affect our lives? There's this reality that religion is like politics - everyone has an opinion. Everyone has an opinion about the church's mission in the world. Some folks think that it should be focused on Christian education; some think that mission is the most important thing that the church has to do; some believe that without the right coffee, snacks, music, etc. that the church will continue to shrink.

But if today's text is Christ's mission statement and the vision that we are to follow, then one would have to believe that we are to bring good news to the poor; proclaim release to

the captives; help provide sight to the blind, to free those who are oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Those of us who grew up in the church would be most excited by seeing the church return to it's Hey Day. When I was a kid, most of my family showed up whenever the church doors were open. After worship on Sunday, we converged on my Grandmother's house for lunch and fellowship with cousins, aunts and uncles. The reality? Going to the movies wasn't an option. We weren't able to go to the mall on Sunday afternoon. It was closed! There were no soccer games or birthday parties on Sunday when I was a kid. As I've shared with you before, there wasn't even any online shopping at Amazon!

But those days are over. Everything's available 24/7/365. Can you imagine what would happen if someone suggested that Best Buy didn't open on holidays? It's a different world. For the church to be relevant, it has to refocus it's efforts.

When Jesus went to the synagogue, what he was doing was brand new. Think about it! Jesus sat down. The people were all looking at him. He looked around and saw familiar faces from his childhood years, older in appearance than before: his childhood friends, now present with their children; the parents of his friends, now senior citizens.

He began with something more than a zinger: a sentence that remains fresh and provocative to this day. Jesus set free the scripture passage he just read; he lets the lion out of its cage; he overthrows the ho-hum expectations of the people around him and says: **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."**

Jesus does the unexpected, the unimaginable, on that memorable sabbath morning in Nazareth. He claimed for himself the ancient prophetic words as his own mission

statement. The reason God's Spirit came crashing down on him at his baptism was to empower him to do precisely this: bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus took all this as his mission statement, and definitely isn't content to leave it as only a string of high-sounding words. Everything that follows in his life, as presented to us in the Gospel, amounts to the living out of the prophecy he claims for himself that sabbath morning in Nazareth.

I think that we struggle to reconcile Christ's mission statement with our own. Our instinct is to say that what we read in today's text is Christ's mission statement - not ours. While our statement and Christ's are intended to be the same, we reframe our mission statement into something that's more convenient to us; something that matches our focus and our timeframe.

For the last three Wednesday nights, we've been studying David Platt's *Radical* at Kirk Night. I've got to be honest with you. This is a tough study for me. It's pretty indicting! Every week, Platt holds a giant mirror up in front of me and asks me to take a close look at myself and to consider the question "What's more important: what I want or what Christ wants?"

I often think to myself, *what does David Platt know?* Unfortunately, the truth is "he knows God's intentions for me, as revealed through God's Living Word." These aren't just his opinion. He backs it all up with scripture!

Friends, I'm not here to beat you up. If you're like me, you're probably already doing a pretty good job of that. I'm here to tell you that you're not in this alone. No one (and I mean no one) is guilt-free when it comes to not hitting the mark Christ sets for us. The Good News is also that none of us are alone when it comes to Christ's offer of the undeserved gift of grace.

Several times a week, I say "if you took all of the imperfect people out of the church (everyone who isn't able to meet scripture's metric), all you'd have left is a big empty building." My prayer for each of us is that we can acknowledge that most of us aren't even close to meeting the mission statement Christ gives us. Admit it, we put ourselves first a majority of the time.

Maybe we should start by developing our own mission statement where we admit our mistakes, (really) try to do better and accept God's grace. Thanks be to God for this amazing gift. Amen.