

Sunday Lesson – January 23, 2022

GOSPEL: Luke 4: 14-21

"To Set the Burdened Free"

Context

"The Holy Spirit is a major actor in Luke's Gospel and in its sequel, the Acts of the Apostles. From the very beginning of the narrative, the Holy Spirit fills and speaks through the story's characters, such as Mary (Luke 1:35, 46-55), Elizabeth (1:41-45), Zechariah (1:67-79), Simeon (2:25-32), and John (3:1-18), giving us important clues about how to interpret the events narrated.



Jesus, the one about whom all the previous characters have spoken, is likewise filled with, and guided by, the Spirit. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus at his baptism (3:22) then leads him into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil for 40 days and nights (4:1-2). Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returns to his home country of Galilee and begins his public ministry (4:14). "He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone" (4:15)." (Excerpts from workingpreacher.org, Revised Common Lectionary, by Elisabeth Johnson)

Insight

"The people of Nazareth weren't ready for the anointing presence of the Holy Spirit to come in with their small-town-boy-made-good when they got up that morning for synagogue. After he makes his little declaration that the prophesy of Isaiah had come to fulfillment in their presence—think about that!—they got angry and sent him packing. It does make you wonder about the phenomenon of expectation, and what it means in the life of faith. Do we go to church looking to fulfill our own (oftentimes paltry, self-centered) expectations? Or, do we come ready and open to see God's expectations manifest themselves before our very eyes?" (Excerpts from rickmorley.com/archives/2267)

Gospel Reading

"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 raised. 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 time to shine!"

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." The Message

What It Could Mean?

The words Jesus speaks in Nazareth are especially important because they are the first words we hear of his public ministry in Luke's Gospel. This is an inaugural address of sorts. What Jesus says here represents the heart of his message and mission. Of course, his message and mission do not come out of the blue, but from the Scriptures. He reads from the prophet Isaiah.

Jesus tells us clearly what his mission is about. He boldly claims to fulfill the words of Isaiah, who speaks of the Spirit anointing him, sending him, compelling him to bring good news to every one of God's children who is bound up, pressed down, broken in spirit, impoverished, imprisoned, and desperately hungry for good news.

The word translated “poor” (*ptochoi* in Greek) has to do with economic status as well as other factors that lowered one’s status in the first-century world—factors such as gender, genealogy, education, occupation, sickness, disability, and degree of religious purity. Jesus’ mission is directed to the poor in the holistic sense of those who for various reasons are relegated to the margins of society. Jesus refuses to recognize these socially determined boundaries, insisting that these very “outsiders” are the special objects of God’s grace and mercy.

The “year of the Lord’s favor” that Jesus proclaims is probably a reference to the year of Jubilee commanded in Leviticus 25, a year in which indentured servants (even resident aliens) were to be released, debts were to be forgiven, and land and property returned to families who had leased or sold them. It was to be a year of radical restoration, but there is little evidence that it was ever practiced in Israel. It was instead projected into the future as an eschatological hope.

Yet perhaps what Jesus has already said will provoke a strong response among many who hear these words today. Good news to the poor and the “year of the Lord’s favor” sound great until we get into the nitty-gritty of what that means. The idea of a radical redistribution of property and wealth, for example, will not sound like good news to many of us who live comfortable lives and do not want to give up what we have. The idea of welcoming certain groups of people into our communities will be unsettling for some. Still Jesus proclaims that **today** this scripture is fulfilled in him. Projecting this vision into a distant future is no longer possible.

Jesus will demonstrate this fulfillment concretely in his acts of healing, liberation, and welcome for all kinds of outsiders—the demon-possessed, the sick and paralyzed, lepers, hemorrhaging women, tax collectors and sinners. Mary has already announced that God is up to some serious table-turning (Luke 1:46-55), and Jesus will have much more to say in Luke’s

Gospel about wealth and status and the reversals God’s reign brings about.

The spiritual aspect of salvation in Luke cannot be separated from economic, social, and political realities. Jesus’ mission is to free people from captivity to sin **and** from captivity to the sinful structures and systems that diminish and destroy lives.

Will hearers today receive this message as good news, or will they respond like the hometown crowd in Nazareth, fearing the loss of privileged position? Simeon, guided by the Spirit, said of the infant Jesus: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). The truth of Simeon’s prophecy is laid bare at Nazareth. Perhaps it will be in the places where Jesus’ mission is proclaimed this Sunday as well.” (*Excerpts from workingpreacher.org, Revised Common Lectionary, by Elisabeth Johnson*)

Readings for Further Study

- [Isaiah 61: 1-1 & 58:6](#) *Announce freedom to all captives*
- [Leviticus 25](#) *The Year of Jubilee – Year of the Lord’s favor*
- [Luke 6: 20-26, 7: 18-23; 12: 18-23; 12: 13-21, 14: 12-14; 16: 1-12; 19:31; 18: 18-26; and 19: 1-10](#) *Wealth and status and the reversals God’s reign brings about*

Thought for the Day

“The Holy Spirit gives liberty to the Christian, direction to the worker, discernment to the teacher, power to the Word, and fruit to faithful service. He reveals the things of Christ.” ~ *Billy Graham*

A Prayer

“O God, you have called your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord.” **Amen.**

~ *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELM p. 317)*