

2019 01 27 – Good News for the Poor

Luke 4:14-21

Jesus has arrived home after being away for several weeks. His journey had begun with a visit to the Jordan River where Jesus was baptized by his cousin John. (You may remember that we heard that story just a couple of weeks ago and were blessed with a baptism of our own.) Then the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he spent forty days with nothing to eat and where he was tempted by the Devil. After a trip that was both incredibly difficult and amazingly spiritual, Jesus started on his way home.

But he didn't take the shortest route. Instead, Jesus travelled throughout the region of Galilee. And as he travelled, he stopped in every town and village and took the time to teach in their synagogues. It turns out he was pretty good at it too. In today's reading we heard that the people were "loud in their praise" and that "[Jesus'] reputation spread throughout the region." This was the beginning of Jesus' ministry and his star of fame was just starting to rise.

And then Jesus came to Nazareth, to the place where he had been brought up, to the place where his parents Mary and Joseph had raised their family.

Nazareth, in the time of Jesus, was a village of about 400 people nestled in the fertile hills just southwest of the Sea of Galilee. It was the kind of place where everybody knew their neighbour. There was a single source of water in the village so you can imagine the gossip that flowed each morning as the women came with their jars to the common well. No doubt everybody would have known that Mary's son, Jesus, was home. http://www.jesus-story.net/nazareth_about.htm

When Saturday came around, the Jewish Sabbath, Jesus went to synagogue, as was his habit. Jesus was, of course, a Jew and he had grown up in a religious family. Like the other young Jewish men in his village, Jesus had been taught to read the Hebrew Scriptures. On this particular Sabbath day, he was the one who stood up in front of his friends and his family to read from the sacred scroll

Now, like us, the Jewish people tend to read their scriptures in a particular order and each week has its own reading. Jesus was handed the scroll that contained the book of the prophet Isaiah. We are told that “he unrolled the scroll and found the passage.” It’s not clear whether this passage was the reading of the day or whether Jesus chose these particular words for his own purpose.

What we do know is that it would have taken some time to find the reading. We know this because we actually have a scroll from that time that contains the entire book of Isaiah. It was one of the first scrolls found in 1947 in the Qumran caves near the shores of the Dead Sea. *(next screen)* This scroll is written on 17 sheets of parchment and is particularly large and heavy. Imagine this... it is about 10 inches high and, when completely unrolled, it is 24 feet long and weighs approximately 50 pounds. So imagine Jesus slowly rolling the leather parchment from one spool to the other as he searched for the correct passage. There would have been a few minutes of silent expectation as the people watched Jesus carefully handle their sacred text.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isaiah_Scroll

And when he arrived at the passage Jesus read:

The spirit of our God is upon me:
because the Most High has anointed me
to bring Good News to those who are poor.

Jesus was reading from the beginning of the 61st chapter of the book of Isaiah. These were words that were initially spoken hundreds of years before Jesus was even born. The original prophet was announcing a time of political and economic rejuvenation for his people. Some scholars suggest that he might have been referring to the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem after the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon. Others admit that they are really not sure of the context. But it is obvious that the prophet was making a proclamation, a proclamation of new hope and new possibility for a people who were poor, who were imprisoned, and who were oppressed.

And now Jesus is standing before the people of his home town reading these same words. So what would they have meant to his neighbours in the village of Nazareth? Well we know that Jesus lived in a time of oppression. We know that the Romans had control of the entire region and they would frequently seize money, land and goods from the peasants in Galilee. Things were so bad that uprisings occurred on a regular basis. Historic records tells us that around the time of Jesus' birth peasants from the surrounding villages attacked the Roman fortress at Sepphoris and were successful in taking back some of the goods that had been seized. (from Richard Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, page 36) Sepphoris was about 3 or 4 miles from Nazareth, so it's very possible that some of the people in that synagogue or, more-likely, their parents had been part of that rebellion.

When Jesus' spoke those words in his home town, the people would, no doubt, have recognized themselves as the poor and the oppressed. Even though the words had originally been spoken hundreds of years before, to a different people, in a different time, the peasants in Nazareth would have known that the good news was also for them. They would have known that Jesus was speaking about their liberty, about their recovery, and about their release.

You also, just heard the same scripture passage. What did it mean for you? Did you think to yourself, "I could do with some good news right now. I'm feeling like life has turned on me and I would love to be free of all the things that are weighing me down." Or did you think of the people in your life who were poor or sick or imprisoned and wonder if these words were for them? Or did you hear the scripture reading and wonder if you were the anointed one, the one being called to make things right, to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those held captive, recovery of sight to the blind, or release to those in prison?

Our response to this passage depends on who we are and where we are in our own lives. Many of us are hurting and many of us have the ability to make a difference both in our own lives and in the lives of others. So before we go back to that scene in Nazareth ask yourself this one question, "What is it that this passage is saying to me in this time and in this place?"

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When Jesus finished reading, the people in the synagogue waited in eager anticipation for what he was going to say next. They waited while he slowly rolled up the scroll. They waited while he carefully gave the heavy document back to the attendant. And they waited while Jesus sat down. You see, in those days, the rabbi sat down to teach. I'm guessing he sat down for at least two reasons 1) everyone else was sitting on the floor so it was hard to make eye contact when you were standing and 2) because they tended to teach for a very long time. So Jesus sat down and then he delivered his punchline. He said, "Today, in your hearing, this scripture passage is fulfilled."

Not it's about to be fulfilled or its fulfillment is just around the corner. But today it is fulfilled. Jesus told his family and friends, the people who had changed his diapers, taught him to read, scolded him as child and watched him grow, he told them that he was the messiah, the one who would set his people free.

So I invite you to stay tuned until next week when we will find out how the people of Nazareth reacted to this announcement. In the meantime... let's continue singing our own story of peace and justice... let's continuing singing our song of good news for the poor.