

Luke 4:14-30

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, 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.'

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, "Doctor, cure yourself!" And you will say, "Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum."'

And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.'

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'

Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord.'

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.'

Today's Gospel reading follows immediately after Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, which followed immediately after his baptism, which we spoke about last week.

In the wilderness, Jesus rejected temptations to abuse his power in several different ways. He was tempted to turn a rock into bread. He was tempted to rule the world, second only to the Devil. He was tempted to put the Lord to the test by jumping off the highest building, to see if God would save him. In each case, Jesus rejected the temptation, because yielding to it would mean using his ability solely for his own benefit, breaking faith with God the Father, and therefore failing in his mission on Earth.

Jesus apparently did some healings around Capernaum during this time, but we don't have the details. There were some rumors, I'm sure, about a voice from Heaven when he was baptized. Jesus also acquired some reputation as a preacher. There were some people who were already speculating that this man might be the Messiah everyone had been waiting for.

It is not an accident that Presidential candidates start their candidacies in the place where they grew up. Military commanders wanting to become Caesar did the same thing. It's part of establishing their authenticity, and makes an explicit connection to the place and time where they are from. So, when Jesus returns to Nazareth, where he grew up, expectations are high.

Picture the scene: the whole community is gathered in the synagogue. The ushers have put out all the extra chairs, because everyone's heard that Jesus is going to speak, and they are not enough. The latecomers are standing in the back. If they had had bulletins, someone would have been frantically making more in the office.

Jesus stands up to read Scripture, and the room goes silent. You could have heard a pin drop.

The Temple servant does not hand him something easy and non-consequential. No easy reading from the Psalms for Jesus.

No, the servant hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah, the prophet who told the people of their upcoming exile, and of their deliverance. The prophet who foretold the Messiah. You remember the words from Christmas Eve, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light..."¹ Yeah, that Isaiah.

Jesus skims through the scroll until he finds the portion he is looking for, and starts reading.

"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."²

¹ Isaiah 9:2

² Isaiah 61:1, 58:6, 62:2.

Then Jesus stops.

In the middle of a sentence.

Right before Isaiah starts talking about the day of vengeance of our God,³ Jesus stops. He hands the scroll back to the servant, and sits down to speak.

That was normal in this time, and in the early church: a preacher would stand to read Scripture, to show respect for Scripture, but then sit down to preach. Jesus is preaching just like any other preacher, except for every word that comes out of his mouth.

“All right, so Jesus doesn’t read about God’s vengeance. Maybe he’s building up to it,” the people think. Jesus tells the gathered people that this passage of Scripture has been fulfilled today, in their hearing.

He says that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him, that he is proclaiming good news to the poor and release to the captives. He sounds like he’s proclaiming himself the Messiah. To people who are looking for someone to start a bloody insurrection, he sounds like he’s getting ready to do it.

Everyone is amazed at the eloquent words that he says, but then he does not do what they expect. He does not do any miracles. He tells them that no prophet is ever accepted in the prophet’s hometown. And he points out stories they already know, stories from their own Scriptures, when God’s love and God’s mercy have gone not to the Israelites, not to the chosen people, but to outsiders, and even to their enemies.

The people are not ready to hear this. They drive him out of town, and want to throw him off a cliff, but he walks away and goes back to Capernaum.

³ v.2 continues, “and the day of vengeance of our God.”

This is Jesus' first public sermon from which we have even a portion. The people who expected big things from this sermon were right. Jesus is starting a campaign. It is just not a military campaign. It is a campaign for the heart and soul of all the earth. He starts it by laying out the thesis, the point, of his ministry on Earth.

Let's listen again to what Jesus says. "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. ... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus came to Earth to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of Heaven. This is good news. The earth is changing, starting with Jesus walking the earth. The earth is slowly becoming part of the kingdom of Heaven. What is the main thing we know about Heaven, from the Scriptures? It's not the Pearly Gates. It's not streets paved with gold. It's that God's will is done there. Every week, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray that God's will would be done on earth, just like it already is in Heaven.

Jesus did not come to Earth to do miracles. He could do them, but they were not the point. He was not Miracle Max, the wizened old miracle worker from the movie *The Princess Bride*. When Jesus did a miracle, it was almost always healing, and it was always moved by compassion. That's the kind of guy whom Jesus is. The Spirit of the Lord is upon him, and he can't help feeling compassion for the poor, the blind, the oppressed, the suffering.

What does this mean for us, in January, 2017, in an America deeply divided and about to inaugurate a new President who seems to further divide the country, and the world?

Truly I tell you, today, in January, in the year two thousand and seventeen, the kingdom of Heaven is still coming. If you look at it long-term and in the big picture, the world is slowly getting better, as God's will is being done more and more.

There are setbacks and people who resist the coming of Heaven. Some of those people resist because they like feeling like they are in control, rather than God being in control. Some of those people resist because they fear God's justice, or enjoy the fruits, for them, of injustice. Some of them are right to fear God's justice.

But resistance is futile, to coin a phrase.⁴ God's plan is long-term, and it will continue to unfold. The world will continue to change, until it is true, that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

What does that mean for us?

We who follow Christ have been called, and given marching orders. Jesus told us that, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you."⁵ About forty days later, at Pentecost, the Spirit of the Lord was poured out upon God's Church.⁶ That means that we have been anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

⁴ Allusion to *Star Trek* is entirely intentional.

⁵ John 20:21.

⁶ Acts 2.

You have heard it said that the church is no longer as relevant as it used to be in America and the world.

I tell you, resist the temptation to use your ability solely for your own benefit. When you do that, you break faith with the Lord who gave you that ability. Use your God-given abilities for the good of all.

Have compassion for your neighbors, for your brothers and sisters. Have compassion, and put your money and your body and your time and your action where your heart is.

Speak God's truth into a quote-unquote "post-factual" world. Do not be afraid to speak with anyone, for the Lord God goes with us.

God's truth, which is not subject to contradiction, that business and politics are not separate from morality – God is sovereign over everything there is.

God's truth, that all human beings are made in the image of God, and that, when one human being is harmed or abandoned or violated, God is harmed or abandoned or violated.

God's truth, that we are our brothers' keepers.

If we truly do this, then we as God's church will receive the holy privilege of being part of God changing the world.

You have heard it said that, in this day and age, there are no miracles any more.

I tell you, when Jesus did miracles, he started by having compassion for all the people around him who needed compassion.

In certain circles, this may sound like a political statement, but it is not. It is a Biblical statement. It is God's truth.

Have compassion for your neighbors, for your brothers and sisters. Have compassion, and put your money and your body and your time and your action where your heart is. Speak God's truth into the world.

The miracles will follow.

Thank God!

AMEN.