

Good News for All@

Luke 4:14-21

January 24, 2016

Dr. Sharlyn Gates

This is, as you can see at the top of your bulletin, the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany. By now, you should be able to tell me what Epiphany means.

Epiphany is when something, or someone, is suddenly magnified – revealed in a way that we hadn't seen before. It's like that light bulb that clicks on in our head and we suddenly say, "Oh, now I see!" Or, that moment when we thump ourselves on the forehead, realizing, "I could have had a V-8."

So in this case, the one revealed is – Jesus, of course.

I spent the week trying to memorize this passage. I went to sleep saying it over and over, trying to get each verse in its consecutive order. I told it to the youth at our winter retreat and I talked about it to Fred before leaving for the retreat.

This scripture isn't new to me, but for some reason, this particular time it stands out in a way it never has before. I love the image of Jesus that I have in my mind with this story from Luke.

Jesus has now been baptized and went out into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil for 40 days. Yet, Luke says he came out of that wilderness experience FULL of the Holy Spirit. It sounds like being in that wilderness, desert place, resisting all those temptations made him stronger – more full of the Spirit than ever before.

He does a little tour through Galilee as he makes his way back home to Nazareth. Luke says he preached and he taught and people were very impressed. Everyone was talking about him and excited about this new preacher.

So, you can imagine how the hometown folks in Nazareth were proud as the word spread about Jesus, the one they remembered as a young boy, the son of the local carpenter – Joseph – and his wife, Mary. Jesus – one of their own, making a name for himself.

As I tried to memorize this passage, especially as I lay in bed with the light off, I could almost picture the scene right before my eyes. I could almost put myself right there in the synagogue, sitting on a bench, waiting with anticipation for Jesus to speak.

I could imagine being filled with a sense of pride as I watch him stand up to read from the Scripture. The attendant takes the scroll to Jesus and he unrolls it in a careful, loving way. It is the scroll from Isaiah.

And I watch, as Jesus looks down through the scribes writing, until he finds the place he wants to read from. And he begins.

He begins to read with a voice like I never heard before. Yes, the teachers, the priests, the Pharisees, they all read with authority because of their training, but this is ... different. They read as a church leader, precise and well trained.

But Jesus ... Jesus reads as if he has embodied these words of Isaiah. It's like the words have become alive in Him. It's like he knows it so well he almost isn't reading. He's just looking at us – at me – and telling this truth.

“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 of course, as soon as I heard “the year of the Lord's favor,” I thought of the Year of Jubilee – that celebration that was meant to happen every 7 years, where we in the Jewish faith, proclaim that all debts are forgiven, including the debt prisoners are paying while locked up for their crime.

That is what we all think of when we hear Jesus proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And then we hear the release of captives, the recovery of sight for those who are blind. And the oppressed will be set free.

We all have our eyes fixed on Jesus – our hometown boy. And hey! We're as good and devout in our religion as the next person, here in Nazareth. We have been hoping for – longing for the Messiah – as has all Jews for a very long time.

Could it be that our native son – Jesus – could he possibly be this one we've been waiting for? He is good. He has a great voice and a calm affect. He doesn't seem nervous. He seems very self confident.

What if our Jesus – from right here in Nazareth turns out to be the Messiah?

All eyes are fixed on him as he takes the scroll he just read from, rolls it up, and hands it back to the attendant. And he goes and sits down.

Of course, we are expecting more now. We expect it because it is the norm here in this day and age. The teacher sits down to teach, as does the preacher. Sitting down is a sign of authority and – believe me, Jesus certainly was the very image of authority.

We sit, watching him, breathlessly waiting for what he will say next. Some of us waiting – just hoping for that word that will tell us he is the Messiah and to give instruction – maybe some code, meaning, “come, join the revolution against the Romans.” Because, of course, that is what we all expected the Messiah would do.

But he sat there looking around at all of us who were looking at him. And then he said: “Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Wow!!! He really does seem to be saying, “I am the one who is anointed. I am the fulfillment of all that Isaiah prophesied. I am the one who is going to bring the good news, who is going to restore sight for the blind; who will set the captives free and heal those who are oppressed – I will heal the broken hearted. I can, and I will, declare a Jubilee! I am the one.

How can we hear this from one so convincing and not believe? How could our hearts turn away when we are hurting so badly; when we long to hear good news straight from God? How could we not already feel comforted just by his very words; his very real presence among us?

Karoline Lewis, who is the Associate Professor of Preaching at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis, writes in her commentary (<http://workingpreacher.org>) on this passage:

“Three weeks into the new year, your resolutions to change your life may be waning. The exercise plan, the healthy eating, the additional prayer time, more intentional sermon prep perhaps all seem a little less capable of the hopes you had for them.

Enter Luke 4 -- a reminder that our life-changing call does not always have to be for the sake of improving ourselves, but for the sake of uplifting the other.

A reminder that our frequent attempts to set out to change our lives are often done in the absence of the one who changes lives. A reminder that the possibility for life-change often demands dependence on another, and not our incessant insistence on independence.

Jesus’ sermon in his hometown of Nazareth is not only a life-changing sermon, it is a life-changing act. God has now entered the world as flesh so that no human can be overlooked. No one can be left in a place of oppression. No one is unworthy of God’s good news.”

This reading of Isaiah – this word from Jesus as he begins his ministry is not just a reading but it is a witness to the fulfillment of the Scripture itself. That’s what Jesus said when he sat down and started speaking.

“Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This is good news! It was good news in Jesus’ day, when he walked the earth and healed the blind and made the lame walk again. He healed the sick, he cared for those who were in dark places, captive to the life they had been living – a life of sin or a life secluded from family and friends because of leprosy; a life of being excluded because of some physical or mental illness.

Jesus came to heal and set free those who were oppressed and in captivity; those who are poor.

But it is good news today, as well. Because it doesn’t matter where you are, or who you are, or what is happening in your life. You might be in the deepest pit of despair, or wallowing in self-guilt and hatred, but Jesus declares this is a year of Jubilee. This is your time to be set free from all those things. And he doesn’t just tell you from a distance.

This is Jesus. This is Immanuel who is God with us. This is another epiphany for us to be able to see Jesus. For our eyes to be opened and actually see him for the Savior he is!

And so, in my vision of seeing Jesus; of being there that day, I can imagine being mesmerized by him – his voice, his face, his expressions.

Finally, perhaps – just maybe - the one we’ve waited for has arrived. And quite possibly he is from right here in Nazareth!

Oh, but wait. There is that good news of who Jesus is and of what he can and does do.

But, of course, there is more to the story. I’ve been reading the newest novel by Mitch Albom, titled, “The Magic Strings of Frankie Preso,” supposedly narrated by Music itself.

When Frankie’s life takes a turn for the worst, Music says: “Things suddenly went from major to minor.”

Tune in for next weeks episode of Part Two of the Good News for All. Do the people support Jesus and give him donations for going out to do missions? Do they decide to follow him and help on the mission field? Or – do things suddenly go from major to minor for the hometown boy of Nazareth?

This is a cliff hanger, folks. Hold on to the Good News you have been given today, for it is real. But also, you’re going to need it for next week when you hear the rest of the story.

Thanks be to God for Jesus, who is the Good News for All people! Amen.

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