

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**  
**Bringing Good News – Luke 4:14-21 – January 24, 2016**

The beginning of a new year has traditionally been a time for embarking on new ventures. New Year's resolutions are a good example of this in the lives of individuals – people resolve to exercise, or eat healthier, or spend more quality time with family – goals to improve oneself. So also in the life of the church, we can think about positive directions we'd like to go. Of course, any time an individual or group sets a goal there has to be not only a plan of action, but also follow through. Without follow through, the best intentioned goals will never take shape. Perhaps that's why so many New Year's resolutions never make it into February.

Yet goals can't be made just out of the blue. There needs to be an underlying purpose, a motivation for moving in a particular direction. In essence, to be able to move in a certain direction, there needs to be something to fuel that progress. Without a sense of purpose or mission, motivation quickly dies, and goals are never reached.

As we follow the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, we see that this is true of Jesus' ministry. He has a purpose, a plan, underlying everything he does. Luke uses the story of Jesus teaching in his hometown synagogue to lay the framework for his entire ministry. This same story is also told in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, but with less detail and it falls later on in the ministry of Jesus. Luke shifts this story toward the beginning of Jesus' ministry because it provides the motivation for what comes next. This story provides the purpose for Jesus' work. And it helps us to understand who he is and why he does what he does.

First – a little bit of context. From the Gospel of Luke we learn that the moment of Jesus' baptism signaled the inauguration of a new beginning in his life when he was empowered by the Holy Spirit to begin his ministry and was identified as God's Son. In everything that Jesus did, he was empowered by his relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. We too receive empowerment from the Holy Spirit when we pursue the work of God in our lives and in our church.

Immediately following his baptism, Jesus had gone out into the wilderness as preparation for his ministry. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he spent 40 days praying and fasting. While he was there he was tempted by the devil, but did not succumb. After this time of trial and preparation, Jesus was again filled with the Holy Spirit, and he returned from the wilderness to begin his ministry in the region of Galilee. He traveled around the countryside, and he taught in the synagogues. People were intrigued and impressed. They began to talk about him. He was looked upon with favor, and the news about him was full of praise.

Then Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, the place where he grew up. He came back home, to teach among those who had watched him since he was a child. On the Sabbath day, and just like he had done in all the other villages he visited, Jesus went into the synagogue.

Among relatives and friends, Jesus would have felt very much at home in the synagogue in Nazareth, having grown up there and having spent quite a bit of time there over the years. No doubt they were eager to hear what he had to say to them. Word had surely spread around Nazareth of his growing fame, and after having been out of town for quite some time, the hometown folks wanted to hear from one of their own. This is not unlike when a young person goes off to seminary, and then comes back to preach in his or her church for the first time. Everyone wants to see what he or she has learned and then give their stamp of approval. There is a certain amount of pride attached to it, when a young person does well.

Jesus stood up among them and took the scroll that was handed to him. He unrolled it. It was a scroll of the writings of the prophet Isaiah. He found the passage for which he was looking and began to read. "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."

After reading this, Jesus rolled the scroll back up, handed it to the attendant and then sat down. After reading the scripture, this was the time for the sermon, for Jesus to make some profound remarks about what he had just read. This was the time for the teaching. All eyes were fixed upon him. They had heard the praises heaped upon him. Now they waited, expectantly, to hear what he had to say. And then he said to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I'm guessing that that's probably not what they expected to hear. A seemingly arrogant statement to say the least. But what exactly did he mean? Since we're about 2000 years removed from the context of this scene, we don't get the full impact of what the hometown folks heard. We know the end of the story. Those folks didn't. Remember, to them, he's just a local boy, and the meaning of what he said took them understandably by surprise.

In effect he was telling the people that this passage from the prophet Isaiah points directly to himself. Luke uses this scene in the gospel to show his readers not only who Jesus is but also what is the underlying purpose of what Jesus will do. It makes reference again to God's Holy Spirit being upon him. Remember back to Jesus' baptism when the Spirit had descended upon him in the form of a dove? The reference to his being anointed affirms that Jesus had authority given to him by God. The passage Jesus read from Isaiah also tells us what form Jesus' ministry will take, what is his purpose. Everything that will come next in his ministry is directly related to this passage. This is his purpose, his motivation, his calling. And taken a step further, it reveals to us our purpose as we follow Jesus as his disciples

First, he came to bring good news to the poor. Over and over again we have and will see the theme of the raising up of those who are poor. The poor hold a special place in God's heart and they have a special place in God's kingdom. We as disciples are called to reach out in ministry to the poor.

Next, Jesus has been sent to release the captives. This refers to various forms of bondage and oppression, including economic (those who lack monetary resources), physical (those who have physical limitations), political (those who have no home, refugees or those who are imprisoned), and mental (those who are controlled by addiction or suffer mental illness). And this release from captivity also refers to those held in bondage to sin. In other words, all of us.

Third, Jesus will bring sight to the blind, referring more so to metaphoric blindness. Jesus is the true light, and he brings light to all the nations, so that all may see the salvation of God. In the darkness of sin, we are all blind, but Jesus comes to shine the light in the darkness. We as his disciples have been called to be the light of the world.

And finally Jesus has been called to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This is a reference to the kingdom of God. Jesus' ministry is the signal that the time of liberation for those who are impoverished and oppressed has come. There is a definite social aspect to the work of Christ and also to us who make up his church.

Jesus' purpose, his motivation was to bring the good news – to bring the good news to the poor and the oppressed, to make a difference in people's lives for the better, to make a difference in the world, to live a life in accordance with the will of God. This purpose became the basis for everything that he did throughout his ministry. He lived it out each and every day of his life. Such a powerful statement about what Jesus had come to do, no wonder Luke moves it to the beginning of the public ministry as sort of a mission statement. As we read through Luke's gospel we will definitely see this take form through the ministry of Jesus.

Now we Christian disciples, like Jesus, have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry out God's work in the world. If we take this passage to heart, our mission becomes very clear. We are to bring the good news to the poor, release the captives, bring sight to the blind, and proclaim the year of God's favor. This is the underlying purpose for what we do. Or if it isn't, it should be.

So if we are to go and bring good news to the poor, release the captives, bring sight to the blind, how does that play out in our lives? We bring in canned goods and other items for our food pantry. We cook and serve Sunday suppers. We donate time and money to agencies that help those who are less fortunate than we are. We pray and advocate for our friends in Columbia. We volunteer at the warming center.

We reach out to those around us who need help. We comfort those who are hurting. We buy groceries for people who are unable to get out and shop for themselves. We shovel the snow from

our elderly neighbor's driveway. We make amends with the person with whom we've been at odds. We spend time listening to those who feel that no one cares. We give encouragement to those who are feeling sadness, grief or despair. We send notes or flowers to those who are ill and visit those who are alone. We create a dialogue with our enemies and attempt reconciliation. We visit those who are imprisoned. We stand up for what is right and speak up when we see that something is wrong. We read and study our Bibles, worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ, praise God and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For Jesus, his motivation and purpose were clear. Bring good news. As his disciples, may we follow in his footsteps.