

“The Unending Sermon” – Luke 4:14-21 – February 10, 2019

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Our passage from Luke’s Gospel this morning gives us a first look at what the ministry of Jesus was like. From it, we get a flavor of the themes that were important to Jesus and it sets an example of the type of teaching that would follow. After his baptism and an extended time of preparation in the wilderness, Jesus’s ministry began in full, and Luke is emphatic in reminding us that Jesus was sent out to do his work filled with God’s Spirit. That what Jesus would model to his students, his listeners, his disciples had its origin in God. That Jesus was speaking for God, as God’s Spirit spoke through him.

Luke sets up the story by explaining that Jesus had gone back to his region, Galilee and was making the circuit, traveling to the different communities. He became known for teaching in their synagogues, their local places of instruction and worship, and they received him positively and with great acclaim. He was beginning to make a name for himself and word about him began to spread throughout the region.

But when first see him in action, Jesus has returned to his own hometown, the place where he grew up – Nazareth. He had lived there for nearly three decades and his family was known in the small community. So, folks were probably pretty excited by the news of his popularity as a traveling preacher and teacher. And I imagine there was much anticipation for them, to actually hear what he had to say. No doubt they felt a touch of pride for his recent successes and wonder for what he might have to say to them.

The story here in fourth chapter of Luke’s Gospel has a couple of purposes – it was Jesus’ coming out, so to speak, to his friends, acquaintances, and family - and, as the first instance of his teachings that Luke describes for us, it lays the foundation for what is coming up and shows us the basis upon which Jesus stands.

On the Sabbath, the community gathered in the synagogue. When Jesus stood up to teach, he was given the scroll of the writings of the prophet Isaiah. No doubt he had chosen that particular scroll ahead of time. This wasn’t a random passage of scripture, but one that Jesus picked specifically for this occasion.

He read portions of the scripture from the 61st chapter of Isaiah – what Elaine read this morning. And it speaks of a time freedom and justice – of healing and wholeness. He is describing a vision of life on earth that is fair and just for all people – and that’s the key point really – for ALL. And we know reality is very much different from this particular vision of the type of life that most people live day to day. A professor of theology, Barbara Crafton, made the comment that “scripture is much more full of hope than of journalism: peace on earth proclaimed when there is no peace, the inversion of unjust power hierarchies proclaimed while they are still firmly in place.” And she comments that to some we may appear rather

foolish proclaiming liberation while still bond in chains. (*Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1*, p. 98)

That comment made think of the African American spirituals that slaves used to write and sing while working in the fields. Spirituals are a combination of Christian values and principals combined with descriptions of the hardships of slavery, but they often give a hopeful glimpse of what "could be," and what "will be" when God's purposes for all people are fully realized. The African-American slaves, hearing the stories from the Old Testament, could resonate with the plight of the enslaved Hebrew people in Egypt and the later exiles, the Israelites, taken away to Babylon. And they paired that with their understandings of Jesus' teachings, writing moving songs that provided a means of hope.

Additionally, I thought of the American Revolution when soldiers fought for independence from England. They had this glorious vision of freedom and representative government where the people would be given a voice. It was a long and bloody war that was waged so that Americans could be free, that is, Americans whose skin was white and whose ancestry was European. There is a line in a song from the Broadway musical *Hamilton* that captures this irony well. The soldiers who fought on the American side of the Revolution were both black and white. They fought and died on the same battlefields. There's a song in the musical called *Yorktown*, in reference to the final battle that signaled the end of the war. The lyric goes:

After a week of fighting, a young man in a red coat stands on a parapet.
We lower our guns as he frantically waves a white handkerchief.
And just like that, it's over. We tend to our wounded, we count our dead.
Black and white soldiers wonder alike if this really means freedom.
Not. Yet.

Jesus had a message of freedom from bondage and oppression. He spoke about it as if it were not just a faraway dream, a vision of some fantasy world. He spoke about it as it that was the way things are supposed to be.

Luke ends this part of the story saying that after Jesus read this scripture passage from Isaiah he sat down, and then all the eyes of the people in the synagogue were fixed on him. They starred at him, perhaps a spark of hope kindling within them. As oppressed people, dominated and occupied by Rome, they longed for their own independence. Could Jesus be the leader of an uprising that could change their current status? Could they fight and win their freedom? This is the type of Messiah they longed for. One who would lead them into battle and victory.

But Jesus' vision wasn't one of uprising and fighting. It was a statement about how things were supposed to be. A vision of God's hope for all of us – justice and healing for all who suffer illness and wrong.

But it's a vision that is not going to happen overnight or in one swift action of God. It is a vision that we as Christians must grasp ahold of. A vision that spurs us into action, not just for ourselves. Because in fact, many of us already live the comforts of a good life. Yet we have people right here in our community – not to mention the tragedy that is called daily life for so many millions of people in this world – that long for a piece of that vision to become reality.

That is our calling. We don't have a quick fix type of Messiah. Our first century brothers and sisters learned that, when they saw Jesus strung up on the cross. We have a Messiah who lives through us, We have a Messiah whose vision calls us into action on behalf of the liberty and freedom for all people. Jesus preached a sermon in that synagogue in Nazareth that was open-ended. Reading the words of Isaiah, with God's Spirit spurring him forward, Jesus spoke of freedom, liberty, healing, wholeness. That same open-ended sermon, spoken to us through God's Spirit, exhorts us to grab hold of that vision, and help bring it to fruition, one small act of liberation at a time.