

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

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“A Defining Moment”

The third in a series entitled, On Being Christian

Luke 4: 14-21

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I need to take a moment to recap where we've been... as we've been thinking together during these days after Epiphany about being Christian. What's been revealed? What's been disclosed about that? That's what epiphany means and the various texts in the Lectionary invite us during this season to see what has been revealed.

Two weeks ago, we tried to see that there is no formula for getting on this journey. There's no one equation... but ... it does seem that there are variables always present.

There is a person who makes a choice. A will... a decision to love God. That freedom is always there.

And there is the other. The Community of Faith... Some form of or part of or aspect of the Church bearing witness... telling the story... extending the invitation... making the revelation of God more clear. You don't get to this by yourself... there's always someone else.

And... there is some mystical element. The Spirit ... at work in your life in ways that cannot be predicted or prompted or programmed... There is something that is beyond our controlling.

That's what we tried to say in sermon one. That there on the pew with you are stories of faith, that are in so many ways all different... and yet in some very important ways... the same.

And last week, we said that one way they are the same is that a Christian is one who has become privy to her own emptiness. A Christian has confessed something about what it means to be human and the confession is, **“I am in need.”**

And furthermore... a Christian has turned to another source... The Source. There's an ache for a destiny and a Christian has named the destiny.

So, here we are again and with Luke again as our teacher we're asking, **“What does it mean to be Christian?”** And Luke is telling us another revealing story... It's an Epiphany.

Our Gospel reading today is the first public act of ministry that Luke chooses to give us. He mentions that Jesus has been out teaching in various synagogues. There's no mention of anything other than that...

No miracles... no healings...

No chasing off demons...

No challenging preaching to “repent.” Nothing dramatic.

And Luke doesn't give us anything specific until this story. This is the way the ministry of Jesus is inaugurated in this gospel, this reading in the synagogue.

It's different in Matthew. In Matthew it's **“Repent, the Kingdom of Heaven is near.”** In other words... **“Turn around... reorient yourself to a truer realm.”**

Mark is similar... **“Repent and believe the good news.”**

John, of course, is very different... comparing him to the other gospels is like comparing *apples and baseballs*. He records these words as Jesus' first, **“What do you want?”** And then **“Come and see.”**

As I said last week, Gospel writers had a rhyme and reason for doing what they do. They aren't blindly recording the facts for us... they're painting a picture. So, for instance, chronology isn't always the guiding concern.

For instance, Matthew and Mark tell the story we read today... but they tell it differently... with different crowd reactions and ... they tell it later. It comes much later.

Luke puts it here... why? Because Luke is using this story as a sort of springboard. Luke is going to frame the ministry of Jesus with this story. Luke is going to reveal to us, even as Jesus revealed to that hometown crowd... who he is and what he's all about.

Jesus heads home. He's been "on tour" and he's tired. So to Nazareth he goes for some home cooking and home court advantage. News for sure spread and so the place is packed with folks anticipating that it'd be a special day. Jesus is turning a head or two as a teacher and folks turned out...

Some proud...

Lots curious...

And maybe a few even wondering...

"Could it be... might he be... you know... the one?"

The day came and Jesus heads to the synagogue. Synagogues were sort of like... church plants... Anywhere there were 10 Jewish men, there could be a synagogue.

And it was a place of teaching... conversation and fellowship... prayer. ... Probably more like a men's Sunday School class than a high-church worship experience.

Jesus always went on the Sabbath. This is an interesting thing to note. As radical as Jesus seemed to be... Jesus always honored synagogue and Sabbath... And the ancient scriptures. A revolutionary that does not destroy tradition... but gets to its essence.

So, when he stood up... He didn't start with something foreign... some new-fangled teaching. He did what any teacher would do. He read the Scriptures... He read from Isaiah. And Luke puts it right here... front and center as a way of saying, **"This is what Jesus is about... this is what Jesus came to do and be."**

And Jesus reads what is a Greek version of the original Hebrew version of Isaiah 61, which reads **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor... to bind up the broken hearted... to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners... and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

This is Luke saying, **"Here's the meaning of the Messiah."**

It's Jesus saying, **"Here's what it means to be me."**

"I'm anointed by God's Spirit..." (Messiah means "anointed") **"And this is what I'm here to do."**

And let's unpack it a bit...

It's good news for the poor. What's the good news? Huh? That they will no longer be poor? Lots have read it that way... It's primarily a political, social word Jesus is proclaiming. And this sort of reversal is a big deal in Luke... almost on every page. And certainly, there is no question that the early church felt the call, just as they had in Judaism to do justice and make things right for the poor.

But... while that's a good word to the poor... I think it's not the good news Jesus came proclaiming. The good news was... **"Your poverty isn't your fault. God isn't punishing you because you have some skeleton in your closet."**

The good news is that **"While there are certainly connections between your life, your existence and your faith, your God... isn't up in heaven doling out bad karma for all the mistakes you made."**

Their theology was if you're poor, you're bad. Small assets meant large debt with God. Bad books, bad health, meant you were bad. Remember all the conversation with Job... **"Job, we know... we know, God doesn't let stuff this bad happen to good people."**

So, if you're poor... you in double trouble. Not only could you not feed your kids, but your assumption was God didn't like you very much.

And Jesus... has come to say... I have good news for you who are poor. You are blessed. Jesus says over and over, that in his book, the poor have a leg up on those who are comfortable now.

God loves us and our circumstances are no indicator of lack of that. And it works both ways... To unpack it some more... **“Don’t look for confirmation of your spiritual health in your material wealth.”** Listening to Jesus in this passage and anywhere... will no doubt change the way you say your prayers... Your external circumstances are not an indicator that things are right or wrong between you and God.

Jesus is here to give us all Good News! We are loved... God is on our side... and a Christian is one who believes that... and believes that Jesus is here to set us free from whatever oppresses us. **“Freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,”** is the Hebrew.

So... Jesus’ ministry is to announce something... Good News... but it’s also to do something, and that is to set captives free and release prisoners from darkness... or as the Greeks translated it and Luke recorded it... **“Give sight to the blind.”**

And like any sacred text... it’s about a lot of things. There’s a political application for sure... And there’s a social agenda... Jesus is not just here to save your soul for someday. Jesus cares... God cares... God’s heart breaks for those who are stuck in oppression... and oppression to anything and everything.

The thing is... we’ll never get to the political and to the societal... apart from our being freed at a deeper level. So... hear what you want, but make sure part of you is hearing... that Jesus’ ministry is about setting you free from whatever holds you captive... And his ministry is about liberating you from darkness.

I asked my spiritual director a long time ago... what the point was. **“What’s the end... the purpose?”** He’s smart and full of profound things and I waited for some elegant thing to flow forth.

And he said... **“It is to be free.”** At first, that was a bit unsatisfying... but it stuck in there... in here... and I had to begin looking harder at myself and to all that seemed to hold me captive... and still does.

I had to begin being honest about the prisons I was in... and am in. My spiritual director had added to his first statement, by the way, that our ability to love... really love... was determined by how free we really were.

Was I free?

Not to obsess about certain things that seemed to get stuck like a squirrel in the cage of my mind? Was I? Try stopping, then... Oh...

Was I free... free to not react predictably to certain things in certain ways? Was I? Then... try not doing that for a while... Oh...

Was I free to be present to every moment and everyone?

Was I free not to spend money in certain ways?

Was I free not to need certain persons’ approval?

Free not to judge? Critique? Condemn?

Finally, was I free to love people... including those who could do nothing for me (so I thought)... Including those who were my enemies.

I had to say... I was not... am not. And so when I hear Jesus saying, **“I’m proclaiming freedom for the captives,”** I’m leaning forward and so are you. We’re captive... and the bars are hard to see sometimes down in this dark dungeon. But they’re there and when you decide to start looking the Spirit will reveal them to you.

Bars... fashioned... forged of our brokenness and the world’s brokenness... sins and Sin. Bars put in place by our needs for pleasure... and security and survival... Needs for affection and esteem... control... power.

These needs create dark prisons... And the passions that the spiritual fathers identified... Greed, lust, anger, despair, vainglory, pride, sloth... these passions run the prisons.

And what it means to be the Messiah is that Jesus is coming to set us free from all that; and a Christian is one who is in the process of being set free. Christians, those who are on the path following Jesus, don’t just say one ‘yes’ to Jesus. There’s always a deeper yes to say, if you want to be set free, that is.

It's not easy... and honestly, sometimes I can feel so discouraged because what I was captive to when I was forty seems to still have a hold of me at forty-something. You know what I'm saying? What Paul was saying? **"The things I want to do, I can't seem to do... The things I don't want to do... well..."** The prisons are familiar.

That's why this last word in the text Jesus chose to read is so important to me. This word, that... again... defines what Jesus is here to do. **"I'm here to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

It was that thing they called The Year of Jubilee.

All debts canceled...

Everything forgiven...

All bets are off.

It was a way of leveling things economically and socially. Property returning to original landowners. It was sort of a "Ollie, ollie, in come free" kind of thing... The Year of Jubilee... The Year of the Lord.

You've had Jubilee kinds of moments, haven't you? Where you have too much to do... say??? And some friend says... **"Hey, don't worry about this... or that."** And it's enough of a lifted load so that you know you're going to make it.

You've known Jubilee...

... an unexpected check arrives to pay off that credit card.

... the repair to the car turned out to be minor.

... thought you were in trouble with your parents
and they were so understanding.

Jubilee... The professor lets you take the exam late... even though she didn't have too. (It could happen... somewhere... in theory.)

Ever had someone say, **"I forgive you."** Someone you hurt... someone you love, who was wounded by you and your woundedness and their love for you was larger than their wounds. That's Jubilee.

Jesus is Jubilee. That is what his ministry is to be. To say to us... **"This is what God is like... with God, every year is Jubilee... everyday is a do-over."** And so, we who are captive... and who fail so often at being free... we captives... can remember every morning that God's mercy is new.

We begin again... we say with Paul, **"Yes we're frustrated, we can't always do and be what we want to do and be... but ... but, thanks be to God, there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus."** And that doesn't just mean you're off some hook of damnation... it means, you aren't condemned to captivity. Being Christian means waking up every day in a world of Jubilee.

One last thought. A question really. I wonder if Jesus... if Luke... intentionally edited Isaiah. He didn't finish the sentence, you know... The line is **"I have come to proclaim the year of God's favor... and.... the day of vengeance of our God."** Jesus forgot that last part... I guess.

Or... did he roll up the papyrus on purpose before he got to the part about the vengeance of God? It's just a question, really, something I'm wondering... for all of us trying to learn from Jesus what it means to be Christian in this defining moment.

It's not that Jesus never has a hard word for folks who need to hear it... but he never seems to lead with judgment. So maybe what it means to be Christian is that the hard words are rare... and that we never preach at Jerusalem without weeping over her first and with her... and that finally, finally... vengeance takes a back seat to mercy.

It's something for Christians to take note of... those of us who follow this merciful one from Nazareth. Amen?