

Jesus' Mission, Our Mission

Isaiah 42:5-9

Luke 4:14-30

This summer we're going to be following Jesus, so to speak, through the gospel of Luke. Not all of Luke's gospel; that would take a year at least. But the representative texts that help us answer a couple of questions—questions that have been on my mind, and on some of yours as well:

Who is the real Jesus? Amid the misuse and abuse of Jesus by several people in leadership in our country, and in the midst of a spiritual awakening in our society, we need a true picture of who Jesus was—and is—and what he said and did. There is a lot of positive energy around spirituality these days, that's the positive news. And, at the same time, there is a fair amount of weird religious energy too; that isn't as positive. Luke is an excellent gospel for helping us with the question, who is the real Jesus?

The other question that Luke will guide us through is, ***How shall we live during this time?*** All of the gospels give us help with that question, and particularly Luke because he pays the most attention to the social and political environment of his time, and therefore shows how Jesus was aware of those things through his teaching and ministry and in how he responded to them, and how he called his followers to respond and live as well. And, because Luke was a

physician and an observer of the human condition, he gives us a more complete picture of what living a fully human, faithful, humble, and even joy-filled life looks like, in a world that is being turned upside down. In Luke's introduction, his very first words are, "After investigating everything thoroughly, I have decided to write an orderly account..." He's read the other gospels! And, he wants to present a fuller picture of the life and ministry of Jesus.

In addition to being a physician, Luke was a friend of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Makes sense, because it's Luke who tells us, more than once, that "Mary pondered all these things in her heart." How did he know that? Because Mary told him. There are more accounts of Mary in Luke than the other gospels.

Luke was a second-generation gentile convert to the faith (most of the first generation of believers were Jewish converts) and we find Luke appearing late in the book of Acts as he joins the apostle Paul on one of his missionary journeys.

In Luke's gospel we get the full account of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary, and Zechariah, and then the births of John the Baptist and then Jesus. Luke is the gospel writer who gives us a short account of Jesus as a pre-adolescent, and then the account of Jesus' baptism, when he is about 30 years old (Luke tells us that). What follows Jesus' baptism is his 40 days in the wilderness, where he experiences testing and temptation, and emerges strong in the Spirit.

This morning, we are looking at what happens immediately following his emergence from the wilderness: Jesus' first public act of ministry as recorded in the gospels. And this particular account is unique to Luke.

In our account this morning, Jesus is now back in his home town of Nazareth and shows up at synagogue to teach. Think of this as his inaugural speech, or maybe his first sermon as the new pastor of his home town church.

Luke 4:14-30

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit (*this is the good result of the wilderness testing experience*), returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ 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,¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written (this is Isaiah 61:1-3):

¹⁸ '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,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

²⁰ 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.²¹ Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. But then they began to say, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

²³ 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."' ²⁴ And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's home town.²⁵ 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;²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.²⁷ There were also many lepers* in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.'

²⁸When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.²⁹ 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.³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

This is the word of the Lord!

Here is Jesus in his first public teaching back in his home town. And it's like an overture to a musical. In the same way that an overture contains musical themes that will appear later in the performance, Jesus' first public teaching contains themes that will become part of his ministry for the next three years. This reading and his teaching from Isaiah 61 is crucially important, as it contains all the themes of Jesus' mission of grace to the world.

So here is Jesus, like the local boy made good, who has run for US Senate and won, and has now come back to his home town—to cheers and accolades. They threw a parade for him. Like any good public servant, newly elected official, or newly installed pastor, the first speeches or sermons are always an indicator of what's important to that person, and what they're going to be about. It touches on issues that matter to them, and signals what they intend to do.

Same with Jesus here. This is a very important message Jesus delivers, and everyone knows it. So their radar is dialed in, and their ears are wide open. "The

eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,” Luke tells us. What is he going to say??

And that day in Nazareth the people expected Jesus to speak affirmatively and decisively about their desire for God to liberate Israel from pagan enemies—because that’s what faithful rabbis did in those days. In the religious literature of that time, we find a longing that God would condemn the wicked nations and pour out wrath and judgment on them, and pour out favor on Israel. Even the preaching of John the Baptist reflects that desire and expectation. And Jesus is supposed to talk about that.

Yet, he doesn’t even mention it. Even in his reading of Isaiah 61 he leaves off a significant verse of that text: go to Isaiah 61 in the Old Testament and it says, in the last part of the reading, *“He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God.”* Jesus leaves off that last line about vengeance, when he reads the passage. And the people would’ve liked to have heard that, no doubt. Because that’s what they really wanted: God to bring vengeance upon the surrounding nations.

By the way... in our country right now we have the top leader of our armed forces who actually thinks Jesus said that, because he can’t talk enough about

how our United States military is God's tool for inflicting violence upon perceived enemies. He admitted publicly that he prays for "overwhelming violence against our enemies." Then he spoke, as if he were quoting scripture, with God speaking and saying, "I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger." This is someone who says he is a Christian and presumes to speak for Jesus. Blatantly misquoting the Bible, and not at all representing the true heart of Jesus that we read about in the Bible, especially in this morning's passage from Luke. This is dangerous! So much for John 3:16! (t-shirt: "I never said that.")

And this was the mindset of the people in Israel in Jesus' day, and Jesus' first message didn't quite go the way people expected in Nazareth that day. Jesus doesn't say what the people expect him to say, or what they want to hear.

It starts out pretty well. Luke tells us that the people were amazed—other translations say astonished—at the *gracious* words that came out of his mouth. Sometimes people have understood this to mean, they were amazed at what a good speaker he was. But it's more likely that they were astonished that he was speaking about God's *grace at all*—grace for everyone, including the nations—instead of grace exclusively *for Israel* and *fierce judgment* for everyone else. That fits well with what followed and helps us understand the peoples' strong reaction.

Because the first thing that happens is that they say things like, “Hey, isn’t this Joseph’s son?” Luke doesn’t include everything that was said, but gives us this representative line of the kind of things that people said. You can imagine them saying, “That’s Mary and Joseph’s kid. Awwwww. Look at him trying to sound all smarty pants.” You can picture them tweaking his cheek... “We remember changing his diapers... he was so cute...” (woosza, woosza...).

That way they could write him off. They didn’t take him seriously. Partly because of what he said in his message about God’s grace for everyone, including the nations; and partly because they were saying, “Who is this whipper snapper to come back here and say *that* to *us*?!?” Based on what happens next, I think it’s safe to say that Jesus had decided, enough was enough.

And the worship service then turns ugly because Jesus adds onto his teaching by giving a couple of illustrations, ***from their own Scripture and their own history*** to illustrate his point about God’s grace for everybody:

1. Elijah (one of their great heroes) who could’ve *fed* anyone in Israel during famine, but was sent only to someone who was (a) a non-Jew (region of Sidon, Assyria—enemy territory!), (b) a woman, and (c) a widow. In other words, Elijah was sent to a social outcast and an enemy. A real outsider.

2. Elisha (Elijah's apprentice), who could've *healed* anyone in Israel but was sent to a person who was (a) a non-Jew (from Syria, to be specific, and not just a Syrian, but Naaman the commander of the enemy Syrian army no less; and (b) a leper. In other words, an enemy and an outcast. This second example would've been even more offensive to them than Elijah feeding the widow from Assyria.

Jesus is pointing out that when the prophets were active—and these were 2 of Israel's greatest heroes—it wasn't just Israel who benefited, but other nations too; even enemies. Obviously, this is not what people wanted to hear.

After using these illustrations—***from their own Scripture and their own history*** (these were real events and not made-up stories; Jesus chooses not to tell a parable here, but gives a history lesson)—I think it's safe to say that Jesus made no friends that day. Except for the social outcasts who were within earshot, who were silently and inwardly cheering; we actually meet them a short time later when they surface, and begin to follow Jesus.

Jesus doesn't meet the people's expectations, and they take offense and then try to hurl him off a cliff!

To summarize: at the outset of his public ministry, in his first teaching back home, his inaugural address if you will, Jesus is signaling what he's going to be about. He gives a template, a master plot, an overture, of his gospel ministry:

First, he's **not** going to be the people's messiah, the popular leader who will appeal to their wishes for a Jewish nationalistic uprising and restore Israel to the glory days of king David. And Jesus is on a mission of a different kind. He's going to be a prophet (as he says of himself), a truth-teller, whose mission is to the kind of people described in the Isaiah 61 reading.

Second, therefore, Jesus **is** going to focus his time and energy on the outsiders, we might call them the "unchurched" of his day, who are hurting, lost, marginalized, and suffering. In fact, if you read the rest of Luke 4, what does Jesus do? He goes to the outlying areas and begins healing people (next week's passage). Then he starts calling his disciples—a rowdy group of not-so civilized foul-mouthed fishermen who don't fit the mold. In other words, he does exactly what he says he's going to do from his reading of Isaiah 61.

If we do a little bit of homework and go back in time a bit, this message of good news to outsiders is actually not new; this isn't the first time it got announced. It is actually announced before Jesus comes on the scene, with the announcement of his birth. Again, we have Luke to thank for this because he is

the only gospel writer who tells us that when Jesus was born, the angels appeared to lowly shepherds out in the fields. Some of the outcasts of society.

And the angel said, fear not, for behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy which shall be for... *all people*. Not just some people. And we can even reach back into the Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures) and see that this was God's intent all along: the good news would be extended to the Gentiles; all nations.

Back to our text and this account in Luke. Jesus is making a strong statement, from the very start of his public ministry, that the gospel is going to be good news, not just to insiders, but also to outsiders, and even to enemies. God's love is wide, and there is a resentment of the wideness of God's love by his hometown people.

Yet (and this is a big yet) I believe that by delivering this message Jesus was actually giving them a chance to join in his mission of grace to the nations. He wasn't trying to offend them intentionally, but inviting them into his mission.

And, he was trying to help God's people remember their *true calling and identity*, which is expressed in those other sacred texts from the prophets, like Isaiah 42, which Alan read for us. Where it says, "*I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness... I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the*

dungeon...” Does this sound familiar? The wording is almost exactly the same as the Isaiah 61 scroll Jesus reads from. Therefore, what Jesus is saying is: Israel’s mission, and Jesus’ mission are actually one and the same.

What Jesus is saying to the people is, I have come to fulfill what God has called ***you*** to be and do! *This is who you are*, and it’s *always been who you are*: to be a light to the nations; a people of healing and justice for *everyone*. I’m here to lead you in that. Come, remember your calling and join me.

The problem with the people that day, however, is that they forgot that this was part of their calling and history. They were so caught up in their wants and desires, and their politics, that they either forgot their true calling, or they just didn’t want to hear it. Or, they had so mangled their interpretations of their sacred Scriptures and their history that they started to believe wrong things about who God is and what God does, and what the awaited messiah was supposed to do.

In our passage, the people were in a rage because Jesus was going to minister to the Gentiles (*those people!*). But Jesus says, I’m here to remind you of your heritage and calling, and in doing so to expand your world, to broaden your understanding of who is invited to be part of my kingdom. Follow me! Join in!

This leads to the main takeaway for us, which is:

This mission of Jesus to the nations, to the outsider if you will, is his Church's mission as well. It's easy to connect those dots from our gospel reading this morning. God's people are the body *of Christ*. When we go from here, we are the incarnation of Jesus for a hurting world, which is hungry for hope. In our gospel account, Jesus is signaling what he is about, *and*, he also signaling what his *church* is going to be about. We get glimpses of this in the gospels, and the book of Acts, and from early church history as God's people went out and carried on the mission of Jesus in the world to the hurting, the lost, the marginalized, the suffering.

We could even rephrase that text from Isaiah 61 and own it for ourselves:

The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon **us**, because he has anointed **us** to bring good news to the poor, recovery of sight, or new insight to those who need new vision, release to the captives (those who are captive and oppressed by burdens, addictions, injustice, and so forth.). Pentecost tells us that the Spirit of the sovereign God *is* upon us. To be a light to those around us.

As Jesus reminded the people that his mission and their mission is to be a light to the nations, let us be reminded of our mission. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world; let your light shine."

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