

Jesus' Mission, Our Mission

Isaiah 42:5-9

Luke 4:14-30

We're following Jesus through Luke's gospel this winter and spring (through Easter), looking at the unique telling of the Jesus story through Luke's eyes. Last week: Jesus' baptism. What follows is Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (usually looked at during Lent). 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.

A couple good questions were asked last week: "How old was Jesus when he appears as an adult? And, how old was he when he was crucified? Great questions! Luke 3:23: "Jesus was about 30 years old when he began his work." And, as we put the gospel timeline together, Jesus went to the cross at age 33. So, he had a full and impactful 3 years of ministry! He packed a lot into those three years.

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. They said, '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.'

²⁸ When 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 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 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 expect 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 the 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. Jesus is supposed to talk about that.

But he doesn’t. 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.

But it 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, including the pagan nations. 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, "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. Awwww. 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...).

They didn't take him seriously, or worse. 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 church service then turns ugly because Jesus adds onto his teaching by giving a couple of illustrations, ***from their own Scripture (the OT) 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 may have been within earshot, who were probably 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—in fact he kind of offends them—and they try to hurl him off a cliff. (An early form of church discipline perhaps... if you don't like your pastor's preaching, take 'em down to one of the bluffs above the Edmonds waterfront and toss 'em off!)

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. It's a new day! 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 or “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 heals 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. Who did the angels appear to when they announced good news? Outsiders. You know the story from Luke 2: And there were in the region what? Stockbrokers watching their stocks by night? Lawyers filing their briefings by night? Preachers preparing their sermons by night? No! There were shepherds watching their flocks by night. The outcasts of society.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and they were very afraid. But the angel said, fear not, for behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy which shall be for... Jerusalem insiders? Pious religious people who have it all together? No. For *all 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. What's going on here? 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 the insiders, but also to the outsider, 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. So much so that they want to throw Jesus off a cliff.

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

What Jesus is saying to them 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*, not just yourselves; your own tribe, if you will. 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.

Two reflections, takeaways for us, which are simply reminders of things we already know, but need to hear again:

1. Jesus says hard things sometimes. Challenging things. Things that may make us uncomfortable, yet come as reminders of who we are called to be and what we are called to do. We need those reminders. I have a book titled, “The Hard Sayings of Jesus.” And many of them are hard, not

because they're hard to *understand* but because they're hard to *do*. But we need them. We need the honest, straightforward Jesus, who wants our best—and wants what's best for everyone.

Mark Twain once said, "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that make me uncomfortable. It's the parts I do understand that make me uncomfortable." I can relate to that. Because sometimes Jesus challenges us, and calls us to join him in his mission of love for the world. Which might sometimes take us to uncomfortable places.

If I'm honest with myself, I want my ease and comfort; I want Jesus to say what I want to hear, I want Jesus in a neat and tidy box; I want him to fit my expectations and my ideas of what I think he should say and do, just like the people did that day in Nazareth.

But Jesus doesn't conform to my expectations of what I think he's supposed to do—whether in my life, in the church or in the world. Sometimes Jesus says hard things. But they're always truthful things, and better things. And loving.

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 expand your

world, to broaden your understanding of who is invited to be part of my kingdom.

Follow me! Join in! Which leads to the second reminder:

2. This mission of Jesus to the outsider is our mission as a church as well. It's easy to connect those dots from our gospel reading this morning. We 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** (and this is a big '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 to the blind (spiritually and in other ways), 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. Carried out these days with covid sensitivities and wisdom. We can adapt! We've had to.

Last week I mentioned the words of identity and affirmation which Jesus heard at his baptism, which are words for us as well: you are God's beloved daughter, you are God's beloved son, with you God is well pleased. So, we are brothers and sisters with Christ, and nothing can separate us from the Father's love.

Now, knowing our identity as beloved children, and having been strengthened by the Holy Spirit, we are called to follow Jesus into the world and participate in his mission of love and grace to all.

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