

## LIBERTY

Luke 4:16-30

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

January 27, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 4, verses 16 through 30. It is on page 727 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus preaches a gracious sermon and narrowly escapes death. How do those things fit together? Let's see. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 4, beginning at verse 16, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>16</sup> And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." <sup>22</sup> And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" <sup>23</sup> And he said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.'" <sup>24</sup> And he said, "Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. <sup>25</sup> But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine came over all the land, <sup>26</sup> and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. <sup>27</sup> And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian." <sup>28</sup> When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. <sup>29</sup> And they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. <sup>30</sup> But passing through their midst, he went away.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*  
You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I find this text to be rather humorous, not necessarily in a “funny-ha-ha” kind of way, but more so in an ironic way. So if you don’t fall on the floor laughing as I explain it, I won’t take any offense. But there are a few ironies in the text, and a few details that are connected with other parts of the Gospel of Luke, and it’s not all immediately obvious. So before we get to the theological application of the text, it will be worth a little bit of time to take a short tour through the text.

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Jesus comes to his hometown. In Luke, this is Jesus’ first recorded sermon. It’s not his first sermon, but it’s the first one Luke records. That makes it special. It sets the course for Jesus’ ministry.

He’s been travelling throughout Galilee and teaching in their synagogues. This has, apparently, been going quite well. The people recognize him as a rabbi, even in his hometown. They reject him after the sermon, but they think well enough of him beforehand to listen to it. It’s not like he’s standing on the street corner, preaching to whomever will listen. Jesus does this in an orderly and structured way. It would be like a fellow pastor coming here and us recognizing him as a pastor and welcoming him to preach. So the attendant hands the scroll of the prophet Isaiah to Jesus —this is an act of welcoming him. The people want him to read and teach. Jesus reads a comforting passage from Isaiah. It comes from Isaiah 61.

When we stop and think about the scene, it’s really quite profound. The people of Nazareth didn’t realize it, but in hindsight we can see what was going on; God was reading his own Scriptures to them. Jesus is the Word of God Incarnate, and here he is reading his own Scriptures to them.

It would be kind of like going to the library for story time, and some local girl is reading a really famous children’s book. But she wrote her books under a pseudonym, so nobody knows it’s her. She reads this story that all the kids know by heart. Then at the end she reveals to the children that she actually wrote the book, but they don’t believe her, and they get mad at her because they think she’s lying, so they all throw their lunches at her. That’s kind of like what’s happening in Nazareth. Nobody gets it, but the reader is the author. God is reading his own Scriptures.

And this fact should teach us something about the authority of the Scriptures. When God shows up on this earth in the flesh, he doesn’t disregard the Scriptures. If anyone has the right to speak on his own authority, it’s Jesus. And sometimes he does, but he also appeals to the authority of the Scriptures. Think about this: when God goes to the synagogue to preach a sermon, he bases the sermon on his Word.

So Jesus reads the text, hands the scroll back to the attendant, and sits down. This was their posture for preaching. For us, a preacher stands in a pulpit; that’s just how we do it. In the synagogue, the rabbi sat down to teach; that’s how they did it. And all the people are watching intently. They heard that Jesus is a great rabbi, and this is a great text from Isaiah; this is sure to be a great sermon. And the sermon goes something like this: **“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”** (4:21). That probably wasn’t the entire sermon; Luke says, “He began to say to them” (4:21). So it sounds like that must have been the first line, and then Jesus expanded on that idea. **“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”**

Now we might want to back up to the text to see what Jesus is talking about. How is this passage fulfilled in their hearing? Jesus is claiming to be the “me” in Isaiah 61. He is, at that very

moment, proclaiming liberty to the captives. He is claiming to be the one anointed by the Lord. This is a reference to Jesus' Baptism in the previous chapter, where the Spirit descended on Jesus in bodily form, and the Father spoke from heaven, saying, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (3:22).

The guy whom the Spirit of the Lord is upon, the guy whom the Lord has anointed, the guy whom the Lord sent to proclaim liberty to the captives, it's Jesus. In essence, Jesus is saying, "That's me. The person who was really speaking when Isaiah wrote these words is me." This means that Jesus is the author of this Scripture, and it means that Jesus is the Messiah.

We might not notice this without a little Hebrew background, but the word "Messiah" is in this text from Isaiah, and Jesus is, in no uncertain terms, claiming to be that Messiah. You might look at the text and think, *Pastor, I don't see that word here.* The word "Messiah" means "anointed one." It comes from the Hebrew verb מָשַׁח (*mashach*), meaning "to anoint," and that's the word in Isaiah 61. "He has anointed me." The noun form in Hebrew is מָשִׁיחַ (*mashiach*). That's where we get our English word "Messiah." It's what we call a "transliteration." It's different from a translation. Instead of making up a new word or using our existing word, "anointed," we keep the Hebrew word and just make it sound a little more Englishy. We do the same thing with the Greek word χριστός (*christos*). I'll give you two guesses what English word comes from χριστός, but you probably only need one: Christ. And guess what the word "Christ" means. It means "anointed one," just like the Hebrew word "messiah." So we use the words Messiah and Christ interchangeably, because they mean the exact same thing.

So, all that to say, and here's the point, when Jesus says, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he is claiming to be the Messiah whose anointing was prophesied in Isaiah. For us, two thousand years later, we kind of think, *Well, yeah, that's what Christians believe.* But consider this from the perspective of the Nazarenes —that is, the people in Nazareth. Despite the gracious words coming out of Jesus' mouth, they know who he is; he's the son of Joseph, or so they thought. He is the son of Joseph, just not by birth; he is adopted. And the people think, *This guy can't be the Messiah, because the Messiah is supposed to be a king* —that's who was anointed in the Old Testament— *and Joseph ain't no king!* Or, again, so they thought. When Matthew records Jesus' genealogy (Matt. 1:2-16), he traces it from David, through the kings of Judah, up until the deportation to Babylon when the throne was taken away. And then he continues it from the last king, down to Joseph, and then to Jesus. Matthew demonstrates that Joseph was actually the legal heir of David's throne, and so was Jesus, because he was legally the son of Joseph, but the people in Nazareth don't know any of this. This was the sort of thing you wanted to keep under wraps, because, if it got out, Herod, or the Romans, or someone else would kill you. But here's Jesus, letting out the family secret. And it's just a little too much for the people in his hometown. Instead of believing him, they decide to kill him.

And Jesus actually pushes them in this direction. When they start to doubt him, because they know he is Joseph's son —just some ordinary carpenter, or, again, so they thought— Jesus puts words in their mouth: "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Physician, heal yourself.' What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well." (4:23). They want a miracle, but before they even get a chance to demand one, Jesus refuses. He tells them about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, who didn't perform miracles to feed or heal

Israelites, even though there was plenty of opportunity. Instead, they performed miracles for foreigners. This makes the people really mad, mad enough to kill him. So they brought him to a cliff in order to throw him down. And then, in one last twist of irony, Jesus performs a miracle after all. He passed through their midst and went away. Let's save this dying thing for another day.

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Now this is the part where we stop and think, *How did it come to this? That really escalated quickly.* What started as a well-respected rabbi preaching a nice sermon on a Saturday morning quickly turned into an attempted murder by an angry mob.

So it's easy to do, but let's not lose sight of the gracious sermon, and especially the passage from Isaiah. It might even give us a clue as to how the day went so wrong.

Jesus is anointed and sent by the Father **"to proclaim good news to the poor ... liberty to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"** (4:18-19).

Most of what this passage is talking about is proclamation. Jesus is sent with a message to proclaim. In this sense, we see Jesus as a prophet. He even compares himself to the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

There are three primary offices from Old Testament Israel that are fulfilled in Jesus Christ: prophet, priest, and king. For the most part, these offices are kept separate, but Jesus brings them all together in himself. The primary office we see in this text is prophet, but the offices of king and priest also show up, because all three of these offices come together in Jesus' work.

Jesus is sent with a message to preach. The word "proclaim" shows up three times. This is what prophets did. We sometimes think of prophecy too narrowly, as if it's just about predicting stuff in the future. That was really a minor feature of what prophets did. Primarily, prophets simply proclaimed the Word of the Lord. This is the first part of their job description. There's a less obvious second part, which we'll get to in a moment, but the first part is simply proclamation. And the gist of Jesus' proclamation can be summarized in one word: "liberty." There is **"good news to the poor"** and **"recovering of sight to the blind,"** but the primary emphasis is on liberty. It's **"liberty to the captives [and] those who are oppressed"** and **"to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

**"The year of the Lord's favor"** is a reference to what was called "The Year of Jubilee" in the Old Testament (Lev. 25). There was this law—the Israelites didn't seem very good at keeping it, but it was on the books—the law made every fiftieth year a year of liberty. There were seven sevens (forty-nine years) and then the fiftieth year was a year of liberty. Among other things, all the slaves were released and land was returned to the family that originally owned it. The practical effect of the law was that you couldn't really buy slaves or land permanently; you could merely rent them for however many years were left until the Year of Jubilee. And the way slavery worked then wasn't anything like the way it worked in the United States. You didn't get kidnapped or forced into slavery. It was a way of paying off debt. There were these two basic fallbacks if you fell into debt: you could sell your land, or you could sell yourself into slavery to pay off your debt. And the Year of Jubilee was at least intended by God to be a universal escape clause. Maybe you've been a slave for forty-eight years, or maybe you've been a slave for one year. When the Year of Jubilee rolls around, you go free and you get your land back. It was designed to preserve a family and their inheritance.

## LIBERTY (Luke 4:16-30)

But it also did something more. It was a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. It teaches us that slavery isn't permanent. And this applies, primarily, to spiritual slavery. It teaches us that our slavery to sin and death is not permanent. In the Garden of Eden, our first parents sold us all into slavery to sin and death. This slavery seems permanent, but it's not. The Year of Jubilee foreshadows this, for Jesus is anointed "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." He proclaims liberty to the captives.

And he actually does more than proclaim it. This is where the text goes beyond the prophetic work of proclaiming something, to the kingly, and even priestly, work of enacting something. Jesus is anointed "to set at liberty those who are oppressed." It's not simply a matter of telling sin and death that they have to let us go. This is Jesus storming the gates of hell, ripping the gates down, and setting his creation free from its bondage to decay (Rom. 8:21).

And it's important to note that when we call this "spiritual liberty," we don't mean to say that it's not physical. It is physical. The spiritual includes the physical. It just goes beyond the temporary physicality we know in this life to include eternal physicality in the life to come. Being set free by Jesus Christ means that the grave has to give you up. Even the maggots and bacteria that eat our dead flesh have to give it all back. The diseases and infirmities that plague us during this life have to give up their claim to us. All of these things are the result of sin. Jesus comes to free us from this. And so the sins that plague our consciences —those sins that accurately tell us we have no right to eternal life— these sins have to let us go. And the devil, who accuses us and seeks to hold us in this bondage, is himself bound and thrown into the fiery pit.

All of this, because Jesus also fulfills the second part of the prophetic job description. The first part of the prophetic job description is to proclaim the Word of the Lord. And we might think that that's all there is to it. But there is this second part that doesn't seem quite right but always seems to happen: the prophet is rejected. Pay attention to this as you read through the Bible. Whenever a prophet is true, it always seems to go badly for him. He is rejected, and he suffers. In this way, all the prophets of the Old Testament were living prophecies of the greater prophet to come. Jesus is that greater prophet who is rejected, not merely as a prophet, but also as our king and priest who offers himself as the sacrifice for sins.

In this way, he "set[s] at liberty those who are oppressed." He bears the punishment. He pays the ransom price. He proclaims liberty, because he purchased our liberty. Sin, death, and the devil have no claim on you. They must give you up. This is what Jesus was anointed to do. This is what he proclaimed, and this is what he did. The result is your freedom. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.