

I have two confessions to make to you this morning. The first one is easy, and that is that I love this text. I have for a long time. The last time I preached on this text I told you about East Belfast Mission, where I took several trips with students to learn about like and ministry in Northern Ireland. They had a youth facility in a converted pub that they affectionately referred to as Luk4, which was named after our text this morning. Because, like Jesus, quoting Isaiah while announcing the beginning of his earthly ministry, they wanted to

Bring good news to the poor,  
proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
And they wanted to set free those who are oppressed,  
And in so doing, proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

They wanted to align their work with the heart of Jesus's message, mission, and ministry.

Before we get to my second confession, let's think a little bit about the context of the words of Jesus here.

Most scholars think of Luke's gospel as the "Gospel of the Spirit" because of how active the Spirit is in Luke.

Just before our story this morning, Luke told us about Jesus' baptism, where the Spirit descended on him like a dove.

Luke tells us that the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted as soon as he was baptized. (We will examine that text on the first Sunday in Lent.)

And here, the Spirit is upon Jesus as he gives what amounts to his inaugural address.

In this scene, as is the case frequently in stories of Jesus's life,

there are some things that are **expected and ordinary**,  
and other things that are **surprising and extraordinary**.

On the one hand, it was **customary** to

- Go to the synagogue on the Sabbath.
- It was also customary for a Rabbi to read scripture.<sup>1</sup>
- And it's also customary, after the reading of the scripture, for a Rabbi to sit down and teach and explain and discuss the scripture

On the other hand, there are parts of the story that are **unusual and surprising**:

First, Jesus' sermon appears to be only one sentence long!

*(I can't imagine that you all would feel like you had gotten your money's worth if I gave a one-sentence sermon!)*

And the one-sentence sermon is so bold as to take your breath away,  
a declaration that mesmerized the congregation  
as they waited breathlessly to hear him speak:

“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The central thrust of Jesus statement is that he is here to bring good news to the poor.

<sup>18</sup> “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
**to bring good news to the poor.**

The other folks mentioned all are poor in something, all are lacking something,  
the captive and the oppressed lack freedom,  
the blind lack sight.

I like how Commentator Elizabeth Johnson expands our understanding of the word “poor.” She writes:

The word poor has to do with economic status as well as other factors that lowered one's status in the first-century world—factors such as gender, genealogy, education, occupation, sickness, disability, and degree of religious purity.

***Jesus' mission is directed to the poor in the holistic sense*** of those

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<sup>1</sup>Now it's not clear if the passage for the day was Isaiah 61 or if Jesus intentionally found this text. The passage as Luke records it is mostly from Isaiah 61, but it also has a phrase from Isaiah 58. The phrase about “letting the oppressed go free.”

who, for various reasons,  
are relegated to the margins of society.  
Jesus refuses to recognize these socially determined boundaries, insisting  
that these very “outsiders” are the special objects of God’s grace and mercy.

So the captives, the blind, the oppressed are all poor in some way, lacking.  
And Jesus says he is here for them.

So the question is, **how was Jesus there for them?** I think the answer is found in one  
word in the Greek text, the word *euangelisasthai*,  
It’s one Greek word that is translated here with three English words,  
“bring good news.”  
The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me to  
**bring good news to the poor.”**

This is the same word that is the root for our denominational name, “Evangelical.”  
The word “gospel” comes from this word, which means “good news.”

Many translations render this as “preaching” good news to the poor, but I  
like the NRSV, which says “bringing” good news to the poor.

In these two different translations, I think we can see a tension that we are all  
aware of, that between **words**, “preaching,” and **action**, “bringing.”

This is not new to us. We all know the saying and the truth behind it: “Actions  
speak louder than words.”

At times in the church's history, people have set aside action for words,  
opting to tell people about Jesus without addressing the work that Jesus clearly  
announces here.

If you are poor, if you are lacking in some way, the news of help can be  
encouraging, but better is **actual help**. Think of it this way:

If you are out of gas on the side of the road, news that there is a gas station up  
the road a mile or two can be good news, but if someone just announces that  
as they speed by, it’s not really helpful.

The better news, the really good news, is if someone stops and drives you to  
the station and back with a gallon of gas.

So here is the point: the scripture was fulfilled in the synagogue in Jesus' hometown  
of Nazareth because the news was **embodied**.

***Because Jesus was there.***

In the flesh.

In-person.

God dwelling with us. *Jesus* was the good news.

So that brings me to my *second confession* this morning. And here it is:

I've never had a more challenging time thinking about or writing a sermon because Jesus words and actions of liberation stand in stark contrast to what he have been hearing the past week from the highest powers that be.

I'm not sure if the Holy Spirit has a sense of humor,  
or if the Holy Spirit is testing me and other pastors who follow the lectionary,  
but what a text this is for today,  
it comes around every three years,  
and it lands on this Sunday.

I'm really sort of at a loss this morning about how to preach this text here at the beginning of a new presidential administration and an inauguration address that, for all practical purposes, has pledged, and is acting in ways diametrically opposed to the spirit and call of Jesus quoting from Isaiah this morning.

With the four richest men in the world in the front row, the new president said he "was saved by God to make America great again," and has now enacted over 200 executive orders, many of which are discriminatory, scapegoating minorities, the weak, and vulnerable.

It's been a lot of bad news for the poor,  
It's been about keeping the captive captive,  
And further oppressing the oppressed.

Now I'm not saying the nation's problems aren't complicated. I'm not saying there are easy answers. I am saying that when the rich and powerful rig the system, they rig it for themselves, so that they can gain more wealth and more power.

And I am saying that in the last week, protesters have showed up at a church in St. Paul to protest that church's open and inclusive policies for LGBTQIA people. Hate seems to be emboldened.

And I AM saying that our own Open Door Learning Center here in our building is planning and preparing for what to do if U.S. Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE) comes to raid their students. As the owners of this building, we too, have to think about how we would handle an ICE raid.

So in the face of this kind hate, cruelty and oppression, what do we do?

We cannot remain silent.

And we must act on behalf of those who are threatened by rich, white, Christian nationalism. We must speak up, and we must act to defend the innocent.

Proclamation without action is empty and hollow. Jesus proclaimed liberation, and he was there in the flesh to do the work he was anointed to do, and “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

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Heavy stuff, right? Let me close with a poem from Jan Richardson entitled “A Prophet’s Blessing.” It is inspired by this passage. You might think of “the blessing” as the Holy Spirit, who will guide and sustain us in these challenging times. Let it give us courage.

### **A Prophet’s Blessing**

This blessing  
finds its way  
behind the bars.

This blessing  
works its way  
beneath the chains.

This blessing  
knows its way  
through a broken heart.

This blessing  
makes a way  
where there is none.

Where there is  
no light,  
this blessing.  
Where there is

no hope,  
this blessing.  
Where there is  
no peace,  
this blessing.  
Where there is  
nothing left,  
this blessing.

In the presence  
of hate.  
In the absence  
of love.  
In the torment  
of pain.  
In the grip  
of fear.

To the one  
in need.  
To the one  
in the cell.  
To the one  
in the dark.  
To the one  
in despair.

Let this blessing come  
as bread.  
Let this blessing come  
as release.  
Let this blessing come  
as sight.  
Let this blessing come  
as freedom.  
Let this blessing come.  
as release.  
Let this blessing come  
as sight.

Let this blessing come  
as freedom.

Let this blessing come.

May we all be Christ's blessing,  
And spread the good news that Jesus brings,  
not just in words,  
But may we **embody** the good news,  
as Jesus did,  
So that we will **BE the good news**  
to the poor and suffering in our world.

**Amen.**