

Luke 4: 14-21

After Jesus was baptized, he was driven by the Holy Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After he survived that, we find him, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit returning to Galilee. The first thing he does, for which he becomes well known, is teach.

Eventually, he arrives in his hometown of Nazareth. He attends worship at the synagogue, just like he always had, and he is invited to read. Someone hands him a scroll, and he finds Isaiah.

Let's start with this. In his day, Jesus would not have had pages, chapters or verses. He had a scroll with no help whatsoever in locating a passage. So, the fact that he found what he was looking for indicates that 1) he could read, which was not common among the peasants of Galilee, and 2) he was very familiar with the scriptures. This might be a subtle suggestion for all Christians of all ages: read your Bible. It's more than just a source of important information about your God and your savior, it is also a very important way to listen to God, to hear what God is trying to tell you, to pay attention to God's will, which makes it easier to follow.

If we don't have the time or the inclination to read the Bible, preferably in a disciplined fashion every day, then we cut ourselves off from much of our potential relationship with God, which, as I often say, is the most important thing in your life. Consider that the first thing we see Jesus doing as he begins his ministry is read from the Bible. This is worth noting and pondering for ourselves.

So, Jesus reads from the OT prophet Isaiah, who is writing about the Messiah.

What is the Messiah's job? Once he is filled with the Spirit and anointed by God, he is supposed to proclaim:

- 1) Good news to the poor
- 2) Release for the captive
- 3) Sight to the blind
- 4) Freedom for the oppressed
- 5) The year of the Lord's favor

After Jesus reads this, he sits down, which is the position a teacher takes, and he announces: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Let's go back to his proclamations, which Jesus has claimed as his own, as his agenda for his time on earth. When we study what Jesus saw as his mission, we can begin to understand what our mission is.

Good News to the Poor: We can understand why the Messiah, the Savior, would bring good news. But, why to the poor? Why specify the poor? Why not to the rich? Don't they deserve to hear the good news, whatever that might be?

And, you know, we are all much richer than anyone's wildest dreams in 1st century Galilee. We are in this room because we have heard the good news. Did we get it by accident? Or did Jesus broaden his scope?

Perhaps Jesus doesn't want us to BE poor. But, he certainly wants us to care about them, locally and globally. He wants us to help them, as we are in Haiti, but all the time. He wants us to consider their needs holy, as holy as our own needs. Jesus sends US to bring good news to the poor – not to ignore them, not to oppress them ourselves, not to wish they'd just go away and let us enjoy our happy, middle-class lives.

The good news of Jesus Christ must be delivered to the poor, not just by preaching it, but by showing it, by living it out, by sharing who we are and what we have with them. God blesses and multiplies our efforts to share the good news with the poor. And Christ weeps when we ignore them and consider them a nuisance.

Release to the Captive: We are all captives of something. I don't think Jesus is limiting his ministry to people in prison, although they must be included in any ministry to captives.

But, we are all captive to something. We are captive to our own desires, appetites, and cravings. Something selfish drives us much of the time. Something that is very clearly in our own self-interest, something that promises to make us feel better about who we are, takes up a lot of our time.

Each one of us must ask ourselves, what is holding me captive? What is keeping me from honoring and nurturing my relationship with God? What has set itself up as being more important for me to serve? What in me resists my efforts to devote more time, money and energy to serving God?

Christ offers release. He wouldn't offer release if we didn't need release. He offers release to us, and through us to others. But, if we are captive, we cannot proclaim release. We need to allow Christ to release us from the things that bind us, that distract us, that convince us that we need to look out for #1 first, then, if time permits, we can give some thought to Jesus and his priorities.

Sight to the Blind: Is this literal? Does Jesus restore the sight of blind people? Legally blind people? Near-sighted, far-sighted, with astigmatism, macular degeneration, cataracts, detached retinas? He certainly did, as we can read in the Gospels. But, I think there is more here than a literal interpretation.

What about spiritual blindness? What about blindness to the world around us, things that interrupt our comfortable lives? There are all kinds of blindness that involve the spirit rather than the eyes.

And Jesus wants to fix our blindness. He wants us to see his light, because he needs us to BE his light. He wants us to see his mission for us. He wants us to see the help he offers us, the encouragement, the direction. And he wants us to see the poor around us and around the world, not just in a crisis that is covered by the media, but all the time and in all places.

Who do we need to see? The poor right here in Mecklenburg as well as around the world; the sick, the elderly, the lonely, those with handicapping conditions. I sent out an email recently asking for help in examining how this church can be more welcoming to people with disabilities. I got several good responses, and I'm grateful. But, I got one that said that this is not important, it shouldn't be a priority, we'll spend more than it's worth, we can carry people where they need to go. I couldn't have been more shocked and appalled. Such blindness. Perhaps we should just adopt the motto: Jamieson – Church of the Able-Bodied, everyone else should find another church home. This sort of blindness creates churches that are cold and callous and condescending. God help us all.

Free the Oppressed: This loops back to the poor and the captive...

The Year of the Lord's Favor: That year is 2010. God's favor is upon us, and always has been. The only question is how do we respond to it?

Rev. Walt Westbrook, January 24, 2010