

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry
Luke 4:14-21
Epiphany 3, Year C January 26, 2024
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Good morning, friends, and welcome as we turn our attention to the beginning of Jesus' ministry according to Luke. Prior to this point in his Gospel, Luke has provided us with infancy stories, information about John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, his genealogy, and his temptation in the wilderness. Some of these stories we have already explored, but others we haven't. You may want to skim through Luke 1:1—4:13 to refresh your memory and fill in any blanks.

Let me state at the outset that the portion concerning Jesus' preaching actually extends to Luke 4:30, where we read about people's responses to what he has to say. The lectionary has divided 4:14-30 into two segments. We'll explore verses 21-30 next week, so stay tuned.

As we begin today's reading in Luke 4:14-15, we're encountering a brief but very helpful summary of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. R. Alan Culpepper describes it this way:

Luke's introduction to the ministry in Galilee gives the reader an indication of the nature of Jesus' work (teaching), one of its common settings (the synagogues), the source of its power (the Spirit), its result (praise), and its extent (to all).

(The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, page 103).

Verse 14 reports that news of Jesus has been spreading and that he is already quite popular. By verse 16, this itinerant teacher arrives in his hometown of Nazareth. First, Luke immediately reminds us that Jesus was raised in an observant Jewish home. His family faithfully attended the synagogue on the sabbath. Next, we watch what he does. His actions make clear that he is very familiar with the practices of his religious faith. He receives the scroll of the Scriptures from the attendant (known as the Hazzan, *huh zaan*'). The detail that Jesus himself unrolled the scroll to the place where he wanted to read is important. Although Jewish worship in Jesus' day may have included a fixed, three-year cycle of Scriptures from the Torah, similar to our lectionary, scholars believe that readers could select their own passages from the Prophets. Jesus apparently did just that by putting together Isaiah 61:1-2a and 58:6. He was probably quite able to read the passage in Hebrew and then provide a commentary on it in Aramaic, which most Jewish listeners would have understood.

This short passage from Isaiah comprises Jesus' inaugural address in Luke. Recall that last week we saw Jesus' inaugural event in the Gospel of John when he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana. Let's see what Luke has Jesus tell us about himself as he begins his ministry in Galilee.

We first learn that the Spirit is upon Jesus because God has anointed him. We only have to look back to Luke 3:21-22 to witness Jesus' baptism. Here, we see a dove, which is a symbol of the Holy Spirit, descend upon him. That same Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tested by Satan (4:1). And, Luke tells us, as Jesus began his ministry in Galilee, that he was "filled with the power of the Holy Spirit" (4:14). We then learn that God has called him to take five actions: 1) to bring good news to the poor; 2) to proclaim release to the captives; 3) to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind; 4) to release the oppressed; and 5) to proclaim the Lord's favor. What we see here is a description of the ministry that Jesus has been sent to undertake.

In Luke, the "poor" are to be understood as those who lack life's basic necessities. There is no reference here to spiritual poverty. This facet of Jesus' ministry should not surprise us at all, for in Luke we have numerous references to his teachings about the poor: Luke 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; and 21:3. As we see him teach and interact with people in all four Gospels, it's clear that those who are poor are his first priority. Some scholars and faith traditions refer to this attitude as Jesus' "preferential option for the poor."

Jesus came to set people free from all sorts of bondage: economic, physical, and demonic. Restoration of sight to the blind is especially important in Jesus' ministry. He deals not only with those who are physically blind but also those who are spiritually blind. Those who are blind live in darkness, but Jesus has come to bring light.

His work to "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" relates to Leviticus 25, where we read about the Jubilee. The purpose of Jubilee was to ensure that what God had given to the people would be available to them again, even if some or all of it had been lost through the years. People and land were liberated. According to verse 10, every 50 years there was to be a time of restoration: "you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family." The land is to lie fallow, though God will provide enough food. Remember that property had been given to each tribe when Israel settled in Israel, but property sometimes had to be sold out of the family or was otherwise taken to pay debts. During Jubilee, this property was to be restored to the family that originally owned it. Relatives

were to help kinfolk reclaim their property. The reason for this redemption of property was that the land belonged to God, who had given it as he chose to be stewarded by the twelve tribes.

Similarly, people who had been taken into servitude, often because they couldn't pay their debts, could be redeemed by family members. One caveat here is that scholars have no evidence that God's law of Jubilee was ever practiced.

Returning to Luke 4:20 we are told that after reading these exciting words from Isaiah, Jesus rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down. In our day, after a Scripture passage has been read, we are likely to expect some kind of commentary or sermon, but what Jesus has to say about this passage is shocking: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (4:21). The people certainly knew that their world hadn't changed. And we are still grappling with the kinds of issues Jesus came to address. So how are we to understand his message? Is Jesus' inaugural address, like that of many politicians we know, simply a list of aspirations that never get adequately addressed? What evidence do we have that Jesus brings Isaiah's prophecy to fruition?

Actually, Jesus fulfilled the role of the long-awaited Messiah by bringing healing, release, and liberation to those who live at the edge of society. He brought them not only redemption and forgiveness of sins but also hope. So, how did he do this?

Think about the kinds of people who usually flocked to hear him: outcasts; tax collectors; women; people who were ill, including untouchables such as lepers. Jesus offered a message of hope and word of God's forgiveness to all. He was willing to talk with anyone, but those who most readily received his message were those who were poor and on the margins.

People who were ill or disabled also gathered around Jesus. He didn't just talk to the sick but he healed them as well. By means of both physical and spiritual restoration, Jesus renewed life and enabled those who had been shunned by their community to be included again and able to live productive lives.

Jesus also cast out demons, thereby liberating those who were in bondage to evil spirits. In Luke 4:31-37, Luke reports that Jesus had been teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum when a demon cried out and threw down the man whose body he was tormenting. When Jesus commanded this demon to come out, it did so without harming the man. Although we view mental illness in a different light, and expect it to be treated with medication and counseling, Jesus' ability to cast out demons

brought wholeness and health to many sufferers.

In a time when people were being constantly harassed and beaten down by their oppressive government, Jesus taught about the importance of compassion and forgiveness. He was encouraging people to love God, love neighbor, and even love one's enemies. The Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—was an important touchstone of Jesus' ministry. And he didn't just talk the talk but he also walked the walk when from the cross he asked God to forgive those who were crucifying him.

We could cite many other examples to show how Jesus fulfilled the prophet's words. But I trust you get the point. Even from its beginning in Galilee, Jesus' ministry focused on proclaiming God's good news and then doing whatever was necessary to enact it in the lives of those he met. As the church, we should be following in Jesus' footsteps to do all that we can, especially to protect those who are most vulnerable: the poor, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant (also referred to as "resident alien").

An unnamed pastor tells a story about Neroli Endacott. While others her age can kick back, relax, shoo the kids out the door, and consider retirement—59-year-old Neroli (who lives on the Gold Coast in Australia), fills her days being mum to some of that states most "at risk" children. Since 1999 she has cared for no less than 100 foster children. And in 2003 she was named Australia's Biggest Hero by *TV Week Magazine* and was also regional finalist for the Royal Brisbane Children's Hospital "mother of the year" award.

One of the kids in Neroli's care said, "Ma gives us kids magical memories, keeps us safe, calms our fears and loves us all unconditionally. I feel pretty special living with her because I'm happy again." A child needs a mother whose warm love will see them protected like that.

How true this is! And what an excellent illustration of what it means to live as a faithful disciple of Christ. Neroli showed by her loving actions how to fulfill the prophecy that Jesus himself claimed—and demonstrated. Her loving care gave the children she fostered a true taste of the love of God. They could also learn from her example how important it is to put others first, to make them feel loved and special.

You have two challenges this week. First, recall some ways in which Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's words in your own life. How do you experience God in your life? That's a very important question. We can listen to a lifetime of sermons and participate in every Bible study offered, but if we don't put into

action what we've learned, then all we're doing is ticking the box that says, "I was there." Christianity is rooted in love, specifically a loving relationship between the Triune God and us mortals. But we have to remember that "love" is not simply a noun that describes an emotion but also a verb that prompts us to act out of the love we profess.

Our second challenge, then, is to spread the love of God by proclaiming good news and acting in ways that enable others to see the love of God in us, just as Neroli did. What we do and what we say make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others. We have to be careful to ensure that our words reflect the love of Jesus, as this illustration in a sermon by Travis Markes reminds us. He wrote:

Sometimes our words can get us into trouble. A man who smelled like a brewery flopped on a seat at a bus stop next to a priest. The man's shirt was stained, clothes messy, and a half empty bottle of wine was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began reading. Needless to say, the priest became uncomfortable at the smell and appearance of his seatmate. After a few minutes the untidy guy turned to the priest and asked, "Say, Father, what causes arthritis?" In his annoyed state, the priest retorted, "Mister, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap women, too much alcohol and contempt for your fellow man." "Well I'll be..." the drunk muttered, returning to his paper. The priest, realizing the error of his comment, apologized. "I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to be so rude. How long have you had arthritis?" "I don't, Reverend. I was just reading here that the Pope does."

I can only imagine the embarrassment the priest must have felt on a number of levels. His flip answer was rude and unkind to someone who needed to know that God loved him. And the content of his answer inadvertently disparaged the Pope. Had he extended some compassion, just as Jesus would have done, he might have been able to give this wandering soul some direction and comfort.

I wonder how often we turn people away, perhaps unintentionally, because we didn't say Christ-like words or do Christ-like deeds. By taking the words of Isaiah unto himself, he shows us why he came. We must walk in the light of Jesus to continue fulfilling his mission. Love. Nan