

“THE GOSPEL FOR TODAY”

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Luke 4:14-21

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Nazareth is the capital and largest city of the northern district of Israel. Today there are approximately 80,000 people who call Nazareth home. Most of these people are Palestinian Arabs who are also Israeli citizens. The population of the city is roughly 1/3 Christian and 2/3 Muslim. There are at least 23 monasteries and churches in Nazareth, which is not surprising because Nazareth has a prominent place in the biblical witness, Nazareth is the hometown of Jesus. In Jesus' time, however, Nazareth was much different than it is today. Most recent archaeological evidence suggests that Nazareth was a very small and insignificant town in the days of Jesus. There is no reference to Nazareth in the Old Testament and no Jewish sources refer to Nazareth before the 3rd century A.D. The consensus is that perhaps no more than roughly 200 people lived in Nazareth around the time of Jesus. This is where Jesus grew up.

According to Luke's gospel account, it was in Nazareth that Jesus first began his public ministry. After his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness where he was tempted by the devil for 40 days. Having resisted the temptations offered there, Jesus returned to Galilee, to Nazareth, full of the power of the Holy Spirit. As a Jewish man, Jesus followed the customs of his faith. Worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath was central to Jewish religious observance and Jesus followed in that custom just like every other observant Jew. You have to remember that the people of Nazareth knew Jesus quite well. So when Jesus, around the age of 30, began to embark upon a teaching ministry, the people of the town would have known. There's not a lot that goes unnoticed in a small town. After his baptism, when he returned from the wilderness, there were reports about Jesus that began to spread throughout the Galilean region.

When Jesus returned to Nazareth, naturally there was more than a fair bit of anticipation. On the Sabbath, as was his custom, Jesus went to the synagogue. He was handed the scroll from which to read. The passage Jesus read is from Isaiah 61. ***“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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”*** When he had finished the reading, the eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. Part pride, part curiosity, the people were all ears. Then Jesus began to say to them, **today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.**

Now I want to say that there's more to this story, and it doesn't end well for Jesus. Eventually the townsfolk get so angry with Jesus, their local kid who got too big for his britches, that they drove him out of the synagogue and up to the brow of the hill on which Nazareth was built so that they could chuck him off the cliff! But we'll get to that another time. For now, I want to stop here and think about what Jesus said as he began to speak to the people in the synagogue. **Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Really?** We hear these words and maybe we're as perplexed as the townspeople of Nazareth may have been those many years ago. The prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled? Have the prisoners been released, have the blind received their sight, have the oppressed been set free? And what is this good news that the poor are supposed to have heard? Last time I checked the poor were still poor, the oppressed were still oppressed, the blind still blind and the prisoners still locked up. **So what did Jesus mean?**

We need to be careful in reading the words and we need to carefully read and hear the words in context. Jesus didn't say that **every** prisoner was released or that **every** blind person had been given sight or that **everyone**

who had been oppressed had been given their freedom. The prophecy of Isaiah speaks of the **servant** upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rests. That **servant** will be anointed to proclaim release and recovery of sight and liberation. That **servant** is to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. **That is the good news** which the poor will hear. So when Jesus says to those gathered in the synagogue that today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, he is actually doing even more than claiming that these events have already happened, he is claiming that **he** is the one on whom the Spirit of the Lord rests, that **he** is the long awaited Messiah. Now for us today, hearing that Jesus claimed that he was the one, that he was the Messiah, is something we absolutely expect and believe. But for those people of Nazareth, to hear this Jesus, this child who grew up in their midst, this teenager who matured before their eyes, this man who they all thought they knew, to hear this Jesus say that **he** was the one that Isaiah foretold, that **he** was the Messiah, well, I don't think I can truly convey the shock and outrage!

Listen to the reading from Isaiah again, first in the way most of us might probably read or hear it, and second in a way that Jesus might have read it that day in Nazareth. ***"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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*** As shocking as it might have been to the people in that synagogue that day, what Jesus is saying is that more pivotal than physical acts of release and healing, the **true good news** is that God cares about the plight of his creation and has chosen to do something about it, **and on a scale that will dwarf our limited imaginations.**

The passage Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 is part of that promise of God to restore and re-establish his people, the people of Israel who had been taken into exile. **The nation of Israel functions at one level as a metaphor for all God's people and so the promise of Isaiah applies to us as well.** The words Jesus quotes then are words of hope, words of promise. They don't necessarily specify particular times and dates, but they do specify that God cares, God hears and God will act to alleviate the suffering and brokenness of the world.

This is the essence of the gospel, this is the good news which is announced to all who are poor, poor in material goods, poor in spirit, poor in hope. When Jesus says today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, he is saying so much more than just that the captives are released, the blind can see and the oppressed are liberated. **He is saying that God cares for the human condition, that God knows intimately the suffering of the world and that God won't just stand idly by while hope is suppressed in exile.** Jesus says that by **his** very presence, by **his** very reading of the prophecy, **he** is God's answer to the cries of his creation, **he is the good news**, his presence among the people is the exquisite proclamation of the Lord's favour.

For Luke, this is Jesus' inauguration address. This is the very heart of the gospel. God cares, God hears and God takes action to do something radical, something unheard of, unimaginable, something that turns creation on its head. God sends Jesus. Jesus, standing there in the synagogue, didn't change the plight of the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the oppressed overnight, at least on the surface it didn't appear that way, but for those who would come to understand that this Jesus of Nazareth was also Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, those who came to believe, **came to understand that Jesus was God's game changer, that with him, and in him, nothing would ever be the same again.**

Today, said Jesus, today because I stand here before you, things have changed. There is such a tone of immediacy to the words of Jesus. **Today**, scripture has been fulfilled. **As we hear the words of scripture read today, does that same sense of immediacy fill us?** What was true for the people of Nazareth those many years ago is also true of us. As the words of our text are read for us, Jesus says that in our hearing today, the scripture has been fulfilled. Again, the poor are still with us, people are still oppressed and wrongly denied their freedom. People are still disabled, in body, mind and spirit. Hurt and pain, suffering and tragedy still

exist, **but Jesus is God's response, Jesus is God's promise of restoration to a world in captivity and exile. This is the good news, this is the gospel for today.**

We are invited by God as a community, as God's community, as God's people, as the church, to work with Jesus in proclaiming the good news of the gospel, the year of the Lord's favour, that God cares for the poor, that God heals the afflicted, that God releases the oppressed and frees those who are bound. Unlike the returning exiles of Isaiah, we are not called to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, **but we are called to help build the kingdom of God.** (Anna Grant-Henderson) The gospel for today is that because of who Jesus is, **we** are called to embrace our calling to be the bearers of good news, God's good news for those who are suffering. That's an incredible challenge and opportunity for God's community, God's church. **Too often the church community can be found yearning for the glory years of yesterday or pining for the promises of tomorrow. But Jesus makes it clear that the gospel is for today. The good news is for the here and now.**

Today, the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing, in our hearing. Do we believe that? Do we believe that because God has become one of us in Jesus of Nazareth, because God became incarnate to live among us because he loved us so much, do we believe that things are different, that the gospel is fulfilled in him? And if we do, doesn't it compel us to get involved now, today, that we act as agents of the good news of Jesus today. **After all, what's the point of dreaming about heaven if you're unable to forgive your friend this morning?**

You know I was back in Calgary last weekend. When I was there I heard a story about two people who were picking up food on New Year's Eve and while they were waiting in their car, a man came up to them asking for some money. His name was Bob (not his real name). He was in a wheelchair and it was minus 30 outside. They looked at the man and decided to help him and buy him some food and a warm beverage. When they were with him, the men noticed that Bob had both legs amputated and his fingers were black and swollen from frostbite. Where are you staying? they asked him. I don't have a place to stay, Bob replied. Why don't you go to the homeless shelter? I won't go there. Too many bad people with bad habits, he replied. He said that he would try to look for a doorway or a trash bin so that he could keep warm, but the men knew that other homeless people had frozen to death recently. So they made a decision to put Bob up in a hotel for a week. Then they contacted several agencies to ask what could be done about the man. The agencies were familiar with Bob, he even had a social worker assigned to him. But they were also overwhelmed with the need. At the end of the week Bob called one of the men who had paid for the hotel and said the hotel were kicking him out and he had nowhere to go, what was he supposed to do now? So the man put him up in another place for a few more days. He took him food every day. He also talked to the social worker and said, look I don't know what else to do for Bob. I can't afford to keep paying for his hotel and food, isn't there something that can be done? On the last day of Bob's hotel stay, the man who had been helping called the social worker and said, look, Bob is leaving the hotel today, he needs to be helped by you some way. Please help – they did. They picked him up and looked after him until his social service payments started, he was on a program called AISH, assured income for the severely handicapped. Bob is now living in a rented place that his AISH payments cover. There's no way of knowing what his future holds, **but for today, he is out of the cold and out of immediate risk. What's the point imagining a future kingdom if you're unwilling to help a stranger in need today? Not all of us will be able to do what those two men did for Bob, but every one of us can do something.**

Today is the day for us to engage in the gospel proclamation of God's good news for all people. When is the right time for justice, for releasing the prisoners, for freeing the oppressed, for attending to the needs of the afflicted, if not today? **People need us today to be the agents of God's good news and if we say that we're just too busy to help people in need today, then we're saying that we're busier than God.** The gospel for today is to understand the moment of opportunity. Today we can choose between the darkness and the light,

today we can choose between good and evil, **between actually doing something and merely wishing something. We don't live in yesterday and we can't live in tomorrow. The only time in which we can live is now, today.**

In a few moments, the service will be over. We will have heard the words of Jesus that today in our hearing the scripture has been fulfilled. **May we not leave this place and return to the world and just close our eyes to what's happening, but may we join with Jesus in building the kingdom of God today!** Today the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing.

Thanks be to God, Amen.