

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Epiphany 3 (23 Jan 2022)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

Give us grace, O Lord, to answer readily the call of our Savior Jesus Christ and proclaim to all people the Good News of his salvation, that we and the whole world may perceive the glory of his marvelous works; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21, Psalm 19

1 I. Jesus Preaches

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.¹

In nomine patris...

Jesus was baptized by his cousin John. After Jesus' baptism, as he prayed, Jesus received the Holy Spirit in a remarkable way. Now Jesus is preaching, and everyone is excited by his words. What, then is Jesus preaching?

Fortunately, Luke answers that question without too much delay. Jesus comes to Nazareth, his own hometown, and here we get the distilled essence of what Jesus had to say to all those different people and communities he met throughout Galilee. Jesus was preaching from the Bible, and this is the theme, the core message, that he summed up for the people who knew him in Nazareth. He reads it straight out of the prophet Isaiah:

'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.'²

Jesus rehearses the promises that God has made all along. These are old promises! These are long-awaited promises. These are promises for the end of time, when everything will be made right, when God will rule uncontested, and when the expectations of those who have been put upon for so long will finally be met and even exceeded in every way.

¹Lk 4.14f. NRSV.

²Lk 4.18f. NRSV.

2 II. Speak to me of Heaven

Note here to whom God made these promises that Jesus now repeats. This good news is for the poor. It's for the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. It is for people who have gotten a raw deal, the short end of the stick. The good news of God isn't for the rich, for the free, for those with perfect vision, and for those with perfect liberty and autonomy. That's interesting.

In the prophet Isaiah, God was speaking tenderly to God's people at a time when they knew poverty and captivity, a time when they were kept in the dark about what their fortunes might be, a time of shame, weakness, and oppression. So to these people in the depths of misery, God made some pretty outrageous promises. God was going to turn things around. In the end, when all the accounts were balanced and God's will was completely brought into effect, conditions were going to change for God's people, and those who had been put upon would be rescued by God's mighty hand.

Isaiah's prophecy, Jesus' proclamation, was based on a commandment from the law of Moses that every fifty years the entire people of God practice a day of Jubilee. This is what Isaiah means when he uses the term, "year of the Lord's favor." Jubilee was a time when enslaved persons were freed, debts were forgiven, and land and houses that had been leased or taken in foreclosure would revert back to the families who originally owned them. There's no record in history or the Bible that the day of Jubilee was ever actually kept. But it was a part of God's law, a radical ethic that completely denied and repudiated the defaults of human greed and acquisitiveness. It was an event that may not have occurred in the past, but because it was part of God's law, God's intent, God's purpose in the world, it would no doubt happen in the future. We call this Isaiah's eschatological vision: this is our first glimpse of the promise of **heaven**. We talked about exactly this at our Vestry meeting this week! And, says Jesus, that future in God's kingdom has come **now**, in the person of Jesus.

You can imagine how people might have felt, hearing Jesus' words. Those who were poor, those who owed debts, those who had lost their land to foreclosure after a bad harvest or a bad decision, would be thrilled! Those who were the beneficiaries of poverty, those who enjoyed cheap goods and cheap labor, those who had added field to field in search of industrial-level efficiencies and increases to their profits would be understandably less excited about Jesus' words. Yes, the world should become a better place. But some other time. Life as it is suits me just fine right now! For the rich, for the advantaged, for those with a corner office on the top floor, for those who gained by others' oppression, Jesus' proclamation wasn't uninteresting: it was a threat!

3 III. Good News for Whom?

We like to say that Jesus' promises are for everyone. And that is true. But not everyone is going to welcome Jesus' promises. When we look out at the world and see people poorer than ourselves, people with fewer opportunities than us, people with less access to power and opportunity and the benefit of the doubt than us or people suffering under the systematic effects of prejudice, then we might have to acknowledge our own status as the rich. We might have to realize that Jesus' words aren't all good news for us. God is in the business of changing the world, and not all those changes are going to be to our advantage.

On the other hand, there's not a person in this room who doesn't experience poverty of one sort or another. There's not a one of us who doesn't find ourselves captive to some impediment or another. We may be struggling with addiction, debt, or depression. We may have a challenging relationship from which we can't just walk away. We may be blinded by our commitment to circumstances which benefit us, or by our refusal to acknowledge an

unpleasant reality, or perhaps by our unreadiness to confront the brokenness in our own family systems. All of us experience the oppression of our own passions, our inner demons, our regrets and the ramifications of our mistakes.

More than that, we are siblings, sisters and brothers with others, people we know and people we don't know, who are themselves struggling with poverty, hunger, racism, and prejudice resulting from a hundred other realities of life, small and large. And if *they* are struggling, our neighbors whom Jesus has commanded us to love, then at some level we are, too – even if we're merely struggling to ignore our responsibility to them.

4 IV. Good News for You

When Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, when Jesus entered the synagogue to proclaim the essence of his mission, his purpose, his life, this is what Jesus said:

'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.'³

As many of us as would be followers of Jesus, this is our mission, too. These are our marching orders! If we would be part of God's beloved community, this is how we are to arrange *our* affairs. In our public dealings and in private, in church functions like Kitchen of Hope and in non-church functions like the bowling league, this is what disciples of Jesus Christ do. We side with the poor, the captive, those whose vision is not clear and those who suffer under systems of oppression. We side with our neighbors, very often, against our own interests and benefit! As we do so, Jesus helps us release the riches that impoverish us, release the addiction to comfort that enslaves us, release the selfish dreams that obscure our vision, and release the privilege that prevents us from standing in solidarity with our neighbor whom God loves.

It can sound demanding. Or it can sound like a miracle. The question is, how do you receive this word from Isaiah? Jesus came to proclaim good news to you.

Amen.

³Lk 4.18f. NRSV.