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First Presbyterian Church
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Luke 4:14-21

“A Vision for Ministry”

This past week Governor Holcomb gave his state of the state address, and in that address he laid out his priorities, his vision for Indiana for the coming year. The two most newsworthy priorities were the Governor’s desire to pay teachers more and to pass hate crimes legislation.

It’s not at all unusual for a public leader, or any leader for that matter, to use opportunities like a state of the state address, or state of the union address, or inaugural speech, to cast a vision for the future. In his speech Gov. Holcomb cast his vision for the future of Indiana.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus casts his vision for the future for the people of God. It’s his inaugural address, the opening scene of his ministry where the curtain lifts on the momentous things that are about to happen in Galilee and beyond.

In today’s story, Jesus has gone back to his hometown to preach, which is always a little awkward. For you see, the people have known Jesus since he was “this big”. “Joseph’s boy”, they call him-which is endearing, but clues us in to the fact that they don’t have the full picture of who is preaching to them. Yet like any good church family, they’re excited to hear one of their own, and they’re proud of him. They’ve also heard rumors that he’s a good teacher and preacher and gets lots of praise from people who hear him. Finally, they think, something good will come from Nazareth and we’ll get to prove all those naysayers wrong.

You see, Nazareth had a reputation for being a real backwater town. Nothing good came from Nazareth; at least that’s what people assumed . . .it’s what Phillip himself said in the Gospel according to John. The Nazarenes were subject to Rome’s oppressive tax structure, which was taxation without representation, and that meant they carried heavy debt that would cost them their farms if they couldn’t pay those debts. 70-80% of the people were classified as poor; they

faced food insecurity, and they lived a subsistent existence. And because they were so poor, their life expectancy was only about 30 years old; which was half the life expectancy of the average Roman.

So when the people sat down to listen to Jesus' sermon, they were excited *and* hoping to hear more than just the reading of some really old words on a scroll. They hoped Jesus' message would have some relevance for them. They wanted to hear something that would have meaning for them. They wanted to have hope in their future.

And indeed, isn't that what all of us want to hear from our leaders? A vision of the future that is hopeful? That's appealing? That gives us a reason to work hard, and sacrifice, and follow that leader?

John Kotter, retired professor from the Harvard Business School, notes "that two of a leader's most important tasks are to offer a compelling vision, and to motivate and inspire people to pursue the vision. A compelling vision has power. It unifies. It excites. It leads people to a willingness to sacrifice and imbues them with a sense of purpose." *(as quoted by Rev. Adam Hamilton, "Compassion, Vision and Perseverance: Lessons from Moses", January 22, 2013, Inaugural Prayer Service)*

Jesus' vision is clear and concise. It's a compelling picture – a preferred picture of the future.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus read. "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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The people knew those words; they were from the prophet Isaiah; they'd heard them a million times. They knew they were a clear reference to the year of the jubilee, the 50th year celebration at the end of 7 cycles of 7 years when debts were forgiven, slaves were to be freed, the land was to be given rest, and a new era was to begin. The vision couldn't get any better that!

They also knew that the people who first heard those words when the prophet Isaiah proclaimed them had been in a similar spot as they are. Having returned to the land after living in exile in Babylon, their ancestors' expectations of a new

creation hadn't materialized. The flourishing community they'd been promised hadn't occurred, and the country was still in conflict and negotiating who would rule what. But into that system came Isaiah, and into their system comes Jesus, who restates God's vision of a material, economic, physical and political transformation that will bring about prosperity, wholeness, and release from their captor's rule.

It was a compelling vision that had the power to unify them in a way no other vision could.

And that's what a compelling vision does. It unifies people. Think about MLK and his "I have a dream" speech. It cast a vision that unified people. It presented a preferred picture of the future.

Going back to Kotter, he suggests that one reason many companies struggle is because they lack a compelling vision for the future. The same is true, of course, for many churches – congregations often don't know why they exist, nor do they have a compelling picture of the future that unifies them. This leaves them anemic, and often desperate to find a quick fix or magic pill that will heal them. I know, because I used to work with a lot of them in my former presbytery as a member of the Congregational Development Ministry Team. In my 18 years in that presbytery we went from a presbytery of 104 churches to 69. Some merged, but many shrunk their way to closure. There's a reason the Bible says, "Without a vision, the people will perish."

These churches didn't know who they were; they knew who they used to be, but that didn't have a clear vision of who they were in the present and where they wanted to go. And so they just floundered, and flitted from one quick fix to the next, or one crisis to another.

The thing is, a vision, while forward looking, has to be rooted in the here and now, not the then and there. Don't get me wrong, a vision needs to fit the DNA of an organization, but it also needs to be contextual.

This, I think, is where too many organizations and churches fall short – they forget about their context and don't pay enough attention to the cultural changes around them. Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Not yesterday, not tomorrow, not some day. But today.

And that's radical. Because faith communities are often consumed with memories of the past and hopes for the future. Which isn't all bad – honoring our ancestors and embracing a hopeful future are important, vital and faithful things to do.

But both "past" and "future" have their shadow sides. Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia--the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future. And overemphasizing the future--the belief that all that matters is that which is to come--often results in anxiety.

Diana Butler Bass, whose name might be familiar to you because she spoke here in October 2017, writes that:

A recent survey from Public Religion Research discovered that the majority of churchgoers in the United States express high levels of both nostalgia and anxiety. By strong majorities, religious Americans--particularly white Protestants, believe that "our best days are behind us" and that the future of society is bleak. In particular, mainline congregations are caught between valorizing the good old days and a deepening sense that some promised future will never arrive. In other words, most Protestants would rather look back with sadness than trust that a more just and beautiful future beckons. As a result, today is lost. Today is merely a stage upon which we mourn the loss of the past and fear what we cannot imagine."

But friends, we cannot lose sight of today. We cannot lose sight of what is happening around us today. Of the cultural changes that are happening today.

This is why the Journal Gazette articles I mentioned in my weekly letter resonated so deeply with me. Here we have two cultural icons or institutions, libraries and magazines, that are shifting how they do business in order to meet the needs of today's consumers, but doing it in a way that is true to their DNA, their mission.

In the case of the library, it wasn't thinking about better ways to get books into peoples' hands; the magazine industry wasn't looking at better ways at getting print magazines into people's hands; instead, they're thinking about the people, and where the people are, and what they need today. And today, people are going online to Instagram or Pinterest and getting immediate access to fashion or interior design or recipes or DIY projects instead of waiting for that monthly magazine to arrive in their mailboxes. Libraries recognize that people learn using

mediums other than books, and so, to quote the article, they “are moving from the written word to learning through experience . . . through hands-on learning; so now you can check out a GoPro video camera or, at our downtown library, you can make stuff on a 3D printer.”

As one of the librarians said, we’re “figuring out what a community needs and providing it.”

But they’re doing that in a way that is true to a library’s mission – which at its essence, is to offer resources so people can learn and acquire new knowledge. They’re just doing it in a 21st century way, because now we learn in a variety of ways, not just by reading a book.

Let’s think about this in our context. Let’s take our religious arts ministry, for example. We have a theater where people can see high quality plays; I don’t know any other church that has a theater. This is a wonderful resource. But maybe instead of only offering plays, we should also offer people an experience of learning how to act by offering a drama workshop or improv class. In the case of the gallery, maybe in addition to seeing an artist’s show, people would like to try their hand at painting or throwing a pot. Maybe they’d like to take a class from the artist. Or maybe they won’t. But the point is, we need to start figuring out what our community needs, in all areas of our ministry.

Because today, friends, is probably the most radical word in Jesus’ vision. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Not yesterday, not tomorrow, not some day. But today.

Because "today" places us in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God's desire for the world. We are workers in carrying out the vision. And the work we do can’t rest on the laurels of our past, or be contrary to who we are. But it does need to be contextual; it should meet the people where they are, instead of where we hope they would be.

My vision for First Presbyterian Church is to be a mover and shaker in this community; a church that people point to and say, “now there’s a church that makes a difference in people’s lives and the life of this city today” . . . not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today.

Amen.

Resources:

Diana Butler Bass, "The Power of Today", Day One Radio, January 24, 2016

Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C,
Volume 1, commentary for Luke 4:14-21