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First Presbyterian Church
February 2, 2024
Luke 4:14-21

“Jesus’s Inaugural Address”

Sometimes, the revised common lectionary, the 3-year schedule of scripture readings I generally follow, includes a text that hits particularly close to home. Sometimes, it speaks to us in a way that is uncanny in its resemblance to what is happening in our lives. Today is one of those days, when we hear Jesus preach an unexpected sermon about mercy, and justice and compassion, and then a whole bunch of people got really mad at him for saying what he says. Does this sound familiar to you? Because it should.

In Luke’s gospel, this is Jesus’ first public declaration of ministry. Last week we heard John’s version which was that of Jesus turning water into wine. But today we get Luke, and Luke presents us with a very different Jesus. Luke’s Jesus will side with the poor and oppressed; he will be a friend and champion of women; and he will speak to truth to power, and he will pay the ultimate price for that. And so, in his very first sermon he sets the stage for all of that when he tells the people assembled, and those of us who are hearing his words generations later, who he is and what he stands for in what many have described as Jesus’ inaugural address.

And this demands our attention. Not because I want to compare Jesus’s inaugural address with the one we heard two weeks ago, but because we must ask, we need to ask, what Jesus’s inaugural words mean to us as Christians, as followers of Jesus today, in this time. What do these words mean for our lives and our commitments?

And so let us engage this text by asking who Jesus is, and how this impacts us. Together, let us be guided by the Holy Spirit and scripture to affirm what we believe and why.

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 John's Gospel. The Nazarenes were poor. They lived under Rome's tax structure which meant they carried heavy debts that would cost them their livelihood if they couldn't repay those debts. They faced food insecurity, and they lived below the poverty line. 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 citizen.

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's vision?

"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, which was 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 for them!

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 were. Having returned to the land after living in exile in Babylon, their ancestors' expectations of a new creation had not materialized. The flourishing community they had been promised had not 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. It cannot be said enough how much power Jesus's message had to change their lives; to be liberated from oppressive structures; to hear that the economic structures that kept them poor and sick and imprisoned would be overturned. It was incredibly good news. Here is the one they have been waiting for. Mary and Joseph's boy, the carpenter's son is the Messiah.

No wonder they were stunned.

"Today," he says, "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." You no longer need to wait.

Now I want to pause here and point out something about that phrase which I just learned. I think what I'm about to say will gain me brownie points with the English teachers in our midst! The key to what Jesus says is in the verb tense. The tense of Jesus's declaration that "the scripture has been fulfilled", is not a once and done, a singular past tense, like saying "Ohio State beat Notre Dame"! The verb tense the writers use is ongoing, reoccurring – it is the perfect verb tense. "Today this scripture is fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled and will need to be fulfilled in your hearing," is what Jesus really says.

This strikes me as an important link between Jesus's mission and our own. It implies that the vision and the mission Jesus proposes and states very clearly – and is what God sent him to do -- is also our mission and our vision.

Now let's not kid ourselves that these words are not challenging. They are very challenging. For those of us who are not among the poor, marginalized, oppressed, or imprisoned in our society, these words can present a real threat.

Turning upside down economic structures that benefit us is a threat. So we need moral courage to listen to God's intent for humanity as Jesus proclaims it today. *Today.*

Because today, as it must have been then, life is not aligned with Jesus's vision. I'm sorry, but I'm not going to stand up here and pretend that it is because it makes some too uncomfortable to hear. I understand I am sometimes accused of being political in my sermons. But if speaking on behalf of the poor, seeking to protect the most vulnerable, and standing in solidarity with the children of God is deemed political or divisive, so be it! What some call political, I call Biblical. To read scripture and apply it to our lives requires the work of interpretation; and that is a challenge. It's a challenge to preach, it's a challenge to hear, and it's a challenge to live. But when the Church of Jesus Christ is told to apologize for preaching "have mercy" or "have compassion" and derided as being "nasty" or "ungracious" when it does, the Church needs to fight back. As one person wrote, "Now is not the time to be flaccid and defanged in our Christian witness." Why? You know why.

Because there are people in our communities, people who we know and love, who are living in uncertainty and fear. There are people finding little welcome but a whole lot of ridicule. There are clinics on the brink, women at risk, whole neighborhoods that are unsafe, companies pulling back from commitments, and advocates for justice being maligned. The humanitarian aid the United States provides has been frozen; we're talking food for children in worn torn countries and basic medical care for the globe's poorest and most vulnerable populations. Everywhere we look there are people needing good news. And today, today, Jesus says there is good news, especially for the poor and oppressed and those who are afraid. And because of who Jesus is and who you claim to be, who I claim to be; who you are, who I am, it is ours to continue the good news that Jesus spoke. To care enough for people – for people -- to speak up on their behalf; to treat all our neighbors with the dignity that is theirs from God, and demand that others do the same. You and me, we, a church that proclaims our hope in Jesus Christ – we carry this sacred task. To hear Jesus's address today requires all of us to look again at scripture and how it guides us, and to rise to the challenge of Jesus's inaugural address. Because as I have said before but I will say again, we are always Christians before we are anything else.

Perhaps it is a good thing that we mainline Christians are not riding shotgun in the seats of power. Because this leaves us free to create a future that is a prophetic witness; that leaves us free to critique all ideologies and powers in relation to the gospel. Because liberated from the constraints of a preferred ideology, we can prophetically critique all who hold power. Jesus would.

Because today 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.

And "today" places us in the middle of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are agents in God's desire for the world. We are the workers called to carry out God's vision.

Amen.

Resources:

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

"Inauguration Prayers, Bishop Budde, Bill Maher, and the future of the mainline church", Chris Curre, Presbyterian Outlook, January 29, 2025