

What Jesus is All About
January 27, 2013
Luke 4:16-30

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "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 favor." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

When I read this passage I am reminded of an old cartoon. A preacher is standing behind the pulpit with his congregation looking on. Boxes of books and suitcases surround the pulpit and you can see a taxi waiting just outside the window. The caption reads, "Today's sermon is one I've wanted to preach for some time now..."

Our reading for today is Jesus' inaugural address – it is what he is all about. It is the sermon he was born to preach. I hope he has his bags packed.

By the time Jesus got to his hometown of Nazareth word was already getting around about his teaching. "He was praised by everyone!" Luke writes. Even without newspapers and the internet, we get the impression that the news about Jesus was starting to go viral. People started showing up just to see what all the fuss was about.

The folks in Nazareth were probably scratching their heads. Joseph's son? A prophet? Famous? When did all this happen? Seems like he was just running around with his little toy hammer. They had to see it with their own eyes. Jesus gives them that opportunity when he stops to teach in his hometown synagogue.

Jesus chooses to read from the prophet Isaiah, much like a preacher chooses a portion of scripture on which to preach. He also did some editing as he read. Everyone stood for the reading. *"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 favor."*

Everyone in that room longed for the day when God would send a messiah to make everything right. They were poor. They were oppressed. They were broken and blind. They knew what it was to be pressed down by rulers and empires. They had read this passage a hundred times always asking the same question, “When?”

Jesus sat down to teach. Every eye was fixed on him. “Today,” he said, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, “I’m the one you have been waiting for.” They hung on his every word and they were amazed.

So far, so good. Jesus did not disappoint. His words were music to their ears. Their hearts began to swell with pride, this is OUR boy. He’s special. If only Jesus would have left it there. He would have been fine. He might even be invited back to tell them more good news. But Jesus couldn’t do it. He had to speak the whole truth, which included the part they didn’t want to hear.

Jesus could read the room. He could see them start to get excited. They were thinking that if their hometown boy was the messiah God would rain down blessings upon them. “This is good news for US!” There lies the problem. They wanted for themselves what they were unwilling to give to others. Using a couple of proverbs Jesus basically says, “I’m not here just for you – but for all the poor – all the oppressed – all the blind – gentiles will enter the kingdom before some of you.”

They didn’t like the sound of that. The more they thought about it the madder they got. They wanted God’s promises for themselves, for their people, but Jesus doesn’t seem to care about their line between “us” and “them.” They get so infuriated they surround Jesus and sweep him away to the edge of a cliff, fully intending to throw him off. He passes through them and goes on his way.

Thank goodness Jesus traveled light. It didn’t take him a U-haul to move on down the road. If preachers had the courage of Jesus, we’d all be packed and ready to go. Generally, people don’t like to be told we need to take a good hard look at ourselves. We want to come to church and get good news, not hard news about our own behavior and attitudes. It may be subtle to us in the reading of this story, but what Jesus said after he amazed them all, enraged them enough to murder him.

He could move on. He didn’t have to preach to the same crowd week after week. The church treasurer wasn’t signing his paycheck.

But Jesus didn’t sugar coat anything throughout his ministry. Yes there is good news – but there is also hard news – hard news that might require us to repent and change our ways – if we have ears to hear.

For example, Jesus once told a story about two men, one rich and one poor. The rich man wore the best clothes and ate like a king every day. Outside the rich man’s house a poor man, named Lazarus sat at the gate. He longed to fill his belly with the scraps from the rich man’s table. Lazarus was covered with sores. Dog, who licked his sores, were more compassionate than the rich man who was content to let Lazarus rot right outside his own house. So Lazarus died and the angels swept him away to be with Abraham while the rich man went to Hades and was tormented. When the rich man begged for some relief he was reminded that during his lifetime he received good things, but Lazarus evil things.

This is a good news story for Lazarus, and every other poor person that has been overlooked, walked by, kept down, and left to die. It is hard news for anyone who has lived comfortably and had a calloused indifference to the plight of others.

Another good news, hard news story is the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a tax collector and rich. He was rich because he was squeezing every last dime he could out of the good folks of Jericho. He was the kind of guy that could take a million dollar bonus and lay off 10,000 workers in the same day. He was hated. But when Jesus came to Jericho, Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see him. Jesus saw Zacchaeus, told him to come down from the tree because he was going to eat lunch at his house. In this one act, Jesus opened wide his arms of grace and embraced Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a changed man – fully committed to making full restitution and more to all those he defrauded. This is a good news story to those who are so lost they have alienated themselves from family and community. It is a hard news story if Jesus thinks we are going to ever forget what schmucks like Zacchaeus have done.

Another good news, hard news story talks about yet another rich guy. Jesus tells this story about a rich guy that builds bigger barns to store his abundant crops and then decides he can relax, eat, drink and be merry. But God responds, “You fool!” This very night your life will be demanded of you. Jesus’ point is clear is hard news for rich people who don’t want to be troubled with the concerns of the poor. Yet it is good news for the poor who can hear Jesus advocating for them.

One last story – a good news, hard news story about another rich man. A certain ruler asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus said, “You know the commandments.” And the man assured Jesus that not only did he know the commandments, he has kept every one of them. “You lack one thing,” Jesus tells the man, “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” The man hung his head and became sad. Jesus said, *“How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”*

I often wonder what sermons Jesus would give today. What stories would he tell? Would the news for us be good news, hard news, or both? Would we fill up with rage or would we repent like Zacchaeus? Would we run him out of town, or eat lunch with him and Zacchaeus?

What we learn from the folks at Nazareth is that we are sorely mistaken if we think the good news is for us and the hard news is for someone else. I find this passage challenging, because most people I know do care about the poor and the oppressed – but do we care enough? Do we have our own blind spots and prejudices that still need to be challenged? Are we willing to consider how economics and politics and institutions help or hinder Jesus agenda? Can we at least keep an open mind and at the same time do all we can to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free? Will we be amazed or filled with rage at what Jesus has to say to us?

May we be a church that proclaims and practices good news and at the same time be willing to hear the hard news. Amen.