

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Third Sunday after Epiphany - Year C

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Psalm 19

I Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

01/27/2019

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

14Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16When 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, 17and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18“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,

19to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

20And 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. 21Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

Mantra

Good morning! From the feedback that I have gotten, it seems that my most successful sermons are the ones where I share stories about my past. This is usually easy, my life is full of hilarious examples of funny stories and mistakes that make wonderful sermon illustrations. But today's story is a little harder for me to share. It's tough because it looks back at what is probably the loneliest time of my life.

I began college living in a dorm and after a bad roommate experience I moved in with a guy who was gone every weekend to go home and visit his girlfriend. This, and the fact that I just didn't seem to fit well with the rest of the guys in my dorm meant that I didn't have any good friends during this time. So, because my college was ten minutes away from where I lived I spent a lot of time with friends from high school. This only made it even harder, and after one year in the dorm I moved back to my parents' house. My second year of college was even worse,

I didn't have the connection from living there to form any bonds outside of the classroom and so I felt like a stranger. At the time, I had no idea that I had depression, and looking back it's obvious that I was at my lowest point.

I was a theology and religious studies major and so I spent a little time in the theology dept. and with the campus ministry people who encouraged me to go on a spring retreat. So, not really knowing anyone more than as an acquaintance, I went on a weekend trip to Lantz Farm in the middle-of-nowhere-West-Virginia. I felt spiritually and emotionally drained, I was looking for answers and hope, some sort of direction.

The retreat remains one of the best things that has ever happened to me. I made some new friends, and even met this weird girl named Megan on the retreat... who I eventually married. I had always liked photography, doing whatever I could with little digital cameras, but over the weekend I took my grandfather's Canon film SLR and kicked off one of my favorite hobbies. But one of the most transformative things that happened for me was that for the first time I really dug into scripture. Up until that point I had just jumped around whenever I read the Bible, never really having any plan. But during that time I remember sitting down on a hill and reading Ephesians from beginning to ending for the first time. When I got home, I read Philippians, and then I got to the book of Colossians. In chapter three I found something that just wouldn't leave me: "*Above all else, clothe yourself with love which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*"¹ This text became my mantra, my mission statement. This would, and still does, shape the way I try to carry out ministry.

¹Colossians 3:14 NRSV

I share all this because what we have before us today in the Gospel of Luke is Jesus announcing his mission statement as he begins his ministry. We pick up the story in Luke at basically the beginning of Jesus' work. He was baptized, anointed with the Holy Spirit, and went into the wilderness to be tempted. He returns home after, and we pick up the text with what he just read. This is the very beginning, Jesus is in his hometown and announcing what the foundation of his ministry will look like for the next year.

I have always loved this little section of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus was just this regular guy in town until not that long ago. He comes home for "church" after some weird events and reads from Isaiah. After reading, he boldly proclaims that this has finally been fulfilled at that very moment, that God had anointed Jesus to do all the things that he had just said... and then he just sits down, dropping the mic as he walks off stage. His hometown didn't particularly like his message, they tried to throw him off a cliff... Which got me wondering; what specifically about this message was, and still is, so radical that we refuse to listen?

Jesus proclaims that the "year of the Lord's favor" was upon them. This was another way of announcing the year of Jubilee. This is a significant detail and it can easily get lost in the story. *"The Jubilee year is the final year of a cycle of seven 'sabbatical' periods of seven years each."*² What makes this year so special is that during this time the Israelites were to forgive all the debts of fellow Israelites and to free any Israelite slaves. That's right, every time the Jubilee year came around, all your debt would be forgiven... can you imagine?! The year was also characterized by

²*The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol III. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. p. 418.

other specific laws and rules that were focused on providing for the economically disadvantaged, especially one's family.³

It's an astounding period of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus, the hillbilly from Galilee, boldly proclaims that he has been chosen to make all this known again in a new way. It's an uncomfortable reminder of how bad of a job we can sometimes do when we're called to care for those with less than what we have. A quick first reading of the story is fine, Jesus reads scripture and begins his ministry. But when we dig deeper, we're confronted with a radical plan that throws everything upside down.

Robert Parham writing in 2007 says that "*Jesus said the gospel was for the poor and oppressed, speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures that marginalized—the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoner.*"⁴

In the commentary *Feasting on the Word*, Ernest Hess argues that the church's mission "*should be informed by Jesus' understanding of his purpose and mission.*"⁵ So, knowing the background, and seeing that this is the beginning of the work that Jesus was doing, how does it shape your understanding of the mission of the church and this congregation? Should we declare a year of forgiveness? Should we proclaim a year of Jubilee here in the place? What would that look like?

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert Parham, *The Agenda: 8 Lessons from Luke 4: Students Guide* (Nashville: Baptist Center for Ethics, 2007, accessible through www.ethicsdaily.com), 3, 4.

⁵ Bartlett, David L., and Barbara B. Taylor. *Feasting on the Word Year C, Volume 1*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 289.

The hallmarks of the Isaiah text and Jesus' ministry are things like mercy and forgiveness, concepts and actions that can seem so foreign to us. In a culture where we've been told the lie that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, the message in the Gospel of Luke today can seem impossible, and yet... God never stops trying. The story of the Bible is the story of God loving all of creation, and then us messing everything up, and then God forgiving and starting over. Time and time again God's love has been shown to us, calling us to return and remain God's people. God never stops trying. Jesus works so hard at it that it gets him killed, and even then God continually works to change our hearts. God never quits... so maybe we shouldn't either. Amen