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Bangor, Maine
January 27, 2019

Good News, Good Ways

Luke 4:14-21

You may have heard me tell the old joke about the minister who goes into the small restaurant for breakfast. When the waitress came for his order, he said, "I'll have two scrambled eggs and a few good words." A few minutes later, the waitress placed the plate in front of him and turned to walk away. "Wait a minute," the preacher said, "I also said I wanted a few good words."

The waitress paused for a moment, then turned and bent down toward her customer. Softly, she said, "If I were you, I wouldn't eat the eggs."

The pastor wanted good words, good news on that morning; and as we read in our lesson from Luke, so did the hometown folks in Nazareth who are gathered to hear Jesus' inaugural sermon.

There is something about preaching that very first sermon to the people who helped to raise you, your peeps who know you best. They are under no illusions about who you are. The folks in the hometown church know your strong points and your weak points. It's a tough crowd to preach to, that's for sure.

I well remember preaching my first sermon. It was the spring of 1969, and I was a college senior. I had transferred to Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas, my sophomore year when my dad had become the President of the school. So while the people in the town and on the campus had known me only for three years, they certainly knew my family. I was the "President's son," so there was that extra measure of pressure that came with who I was. My fraternity brothers, none of whom normally went to church, would be there to hear me, as well as Baker faculty and staff and people from the community.

Not surprisingly, then, I really sweated over that first sermon. I dearly wanted to hit the ball out of the park. I wanted to make my family proud. I wanted that maiden voyage to be interesting and entertaining for the Zeta Chi's--my fun-loving frat brothers. I wanted to appeal to the Baker professors and administrators, so that first sermon needed to be witty and intellectual. I was an English major, so I wanted to demonstrate that I knew my way around classical and contemporary literature. I wanted my pastor to feel that he had not made a mistake by allowing me to preach. In short, I desperately wanted those twenty minutes not to be "amateur hour," but to be an uplifting, totally memorable occasion. Oh, how I wanted to be that young man with the bright and promising future!

Well, the title of that first preaching effort was "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night." The title was taken from a poem I still love by Dylan Thomas. But looking back on that Sunday morning 50 years ago, I cringe at what I thought was the world's greatest first sermon. Looking at it now, it reads like a giant collection of Hallmark Cards--one sappy sentiment after another, a mass of platitudes--really, really good news! All the people I wanted to impress were very kind, as I remember, but it's clear to me now that I had a lot to learn. I had not been to seminary, of course. And while I had

minored in religion at Baker, I did not then have the deep Biblical grounding that would come later. My life experience was limited and so was my world view. To be sure, I had unrealistic expectations. Suffice it to say, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" was a very typical first effort.

The situation with Jesus, however, was considerably different--to say the least. As small as Baldwin City was --about 2,000 residents--Nazareth was even smaller. We're told that the population was comparable to a medium-sized Congregational Church or about "two to four hundred villagers" (Kim Beckman, Excavating Jesus). While I preached my inaugural effort in the campus church, modern scholars have said that Jesus' "synagogue" may actually have been a gathering of the faithful in the open air. While I was a known person in my small community, Jesus by the time he began his Galilean ministry was a local celebrity. The hometown folks knew Jesus as "Joseph's son" and "Mary's boy," but they also recognized that he had a following far beyond Nazareth.

While I spoke about Dylan Thomas at my first sermon, Jesus took his text from Isaiah. And so when he opened the scroll, he selected a famous passage:

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.

Jesus' decision to quote the Isaiah passage as the text for his debut sermon does at least two things. First, it outlines his job description as the Messiah. He is telling the people what he will be about--the work of preaching, teaching and healing. In this passage, Jesus lifts up the ones who will be at the very heart of his ministry: the people on the margins. Jesus mentions the impoverished first and then those who are imprisoned and then the blind and then those who have been mistreated. As one scholar speaks of it, "Jesus sings Isaiah's song of good news for the poor, in the key of his mother Mary of Nazareth" (Kim Beckmann, Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1).

What Jesus issues, then, are the marching orders for ministry. Since that auspicious occasion, how many ordination services have contained those same words from the Hebrew Bible? Every person who has decided on a religious vocation has had to come to terms with Isaiah's vision and Jesus' endorsement of them.

These immortal words remind me of the wonderful story told about a monk and a cripple:

Going to town one day to sell some small articles, Abba Agathon (one of the Egyptian fathers) met a cripple on the roadside, paralyzed in his legs, who asked him where he was going. Abba Agathon replied, "To town, to sell some things." The other said, "Do me the favor of carrying me there." So he carried him to the town. The cripple said to him, "Put me down where you sell your wares." He did so. When he had sold an article, the cripple asked, "What did you sell it for?" and he told him the price. The other said, "Buy me a cake," and he bought it. When Abba Agathon had sold a second article, the sick man asked, "How much did you sell it for?" and he told him the price of it. Then the other said, "Buy me this," and he bought it. When Agathon, having sold all his wares wanted to go, he said to him, "Are you going back?" and he replied, "Yes." Then said he, "Do me the favor of carrying me back to the place where you found me." Once more picking him up, he carried him back to that place. Then the

cripple said, "Agathon, you are filled with divine blessings, in heaven and on earth." Raising his eyes, Agathon saw no man; it was an Angel of the Lord (The Sayings of the Desert Fathers).

It is easy to see that in this story Abba Agathon is living out Jesus' vision for ministry as articulated by Isaiah.

The second element behind Jesus' selection of this particular text is that it also lifts up the principles behind the "Year of Jubilee." Since the beginning of Biblical time, there has been a vision of proclaiming a "Jubilee" every 50 years. During this special year, debts were forgiven, prisoners were released, lands and possessions were restored to the people who lost them. While scholars have debated whether or not the Jubilee principles were actually practiced, it has remained--to this very day--the idea of God's people making things right, of restoring a righteous balance in an unjust society. Indeed one commentator has written about the economic implications of Jubilee, saying that it not only "protected the poor from their two greatest threats: the loss of land and the loss of freedom," but also was "A hope, a challenge to all private ownership rights, and an affirmation that God owns the land and that God's economy supersedes human economies" (Ann M. Svennungsen, New Proclamation 2007).

In his book, Provoking the Gospel of Luke, Richard Swanson writes about the fact that Jesus is not coming back to preach a radical, fiery word to the hometown folks. As he lays out his mission to the people of Nazareth, Jesus is doing just the opposite. By quoting Isaiah to these people whom he knows best, "Jesus has just rung a bell that echoes back to the first entry into the land. Old hopes are often domesticated hopes, at least for people who have been forced back on the oldest, more durable hopes." Swanson asks the question, "What if in this scene Jesus learns something about this old passage, these old hopes, by watching the faces of the old ones in the gathered congregation?"

So we wonder, then, if Jesus, as he is reading this text in the midst of his people, doesn't suddenly feel a powerful connection with these individuals he loves and cares for and the ministry ahead. That is the power of Scripture. Across the face of my life in the church, I have heard--as you have--Scripture read with great power and meaning. Whatever your experience has been, it seems clear that on that day Jesus did indeed hit the ball out of the park. He clearly commanded the moment, for Luke tells us that "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." And a few lines later, Chapter Four tells us "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth."

But I am getting ahead of myself. In the verse which immediately follows the Isaiah passage, we read that Jesus "Rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down." And so now, after having read his text, Jesus delivers the sermon. We are not sure if Dr. Luke reported to us a synopsis of it or if part of it has been lost, but all we are given of Jesus' first sermon is just one line, the last line of our lesson: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

To be sure, Jesus lived up to his billing. He wasn't a snake oil salesman. He wasn't a charlatan. He was the real thing. He did what he said he would do. Jesus did, in fact, fulfill the scripture. He turned the world upside down. He did "Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night."

But I often wonder about Jesus' legacy. In a commentary on this passage, one scholar has been wondering about the same thing: "We have buildings, budgets, staff, and members, but do we have the power of the Holy Spirit?" (Robert Brearly, Feasting on the Word, Year C). What we have in the church of the Twenty-First Century is still a very human institution. Indeed, Christians are a collection of god's people who are "slouching toward Bethlehem," as Joan Didion put it. For us, Jesus is the plumb-line, the vision of balance, of centeredness, of rightness in all things. We who follow him are left to struggle to make his "good news and good ways" speak to our day and time with justice and power and authenticity. But we--all of us--are very human vessels of the Holy Spirit.

I close with a story which comes from the pen of Alan Paton, the author of Cry, the Beloved Country, the great classic about Southern Africa written years ago:

The story involves a black man who lost his son in Johannesburg, South Africa. The man got his money together and went to Johannesburg. Someone stole his money. Now, he is broke in this large city, and he does not know where to go. A priest takes him in, and is so good to him. The priest gives him a place to sleep and feeds him. He tells the man he can stay there as long as he wishes. The man says, "I have to find my son." So the priest gives him some money.

As the man is about to leave, he is standing by the door with the priest. He turns to the priest and says, "You are a good man, sir. You are a good man." And then the priest says, "No, I'm not. I'm a selfish man, but God has laid his hand on me" (Dr. Barry Bailey).

And that word takes us back to the author of this Gospel, Luke. According to tradition, he was a doctor of medicine. For Barbara Brown Taylor, the Gospel writer was an example of a transformed life: "I like to think that Luke never resigned his job as a healer," she says. "He just changed medicines." Rather than dispense physical remedies, Dr. Luke "told stories with power to mend broken lives and revive faint hearts" (Gospel Medicine).

And that, of course, is also our call. The spirit of the Lord is upon each of us to bring the good news in new ways. In our adult class this morning, Madonna Arsenault lifted up beloved words of Howard Thurman. I lift them up to you for our marching orders in this New Year, the year of the Lord's favor:

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins;
To find the lost, to heal the broken,
To feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,
To rebuild nations,
To bring peace among the peoples,
To make music in the heart.*

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