

# “Where It Begins”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – January 17, 2021*

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Rev. John Wahl

Luke 4:14-30

Last Sunday, we heard about John – the one sent to announce (quoting the prophet Isaiah) that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” – preparing the way for Jesus by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness / release of sins. This Sunday, Jesus begins his public ministry by proclaiming release to captives and the oppressed; and the forgiveness of debts. In Nazareth, his hometown, he announces that today – in his hearer’s presence – the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled, and the year of the Lord’s favor has come.

After his baptism, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for forty days where he experienced three temptations: to turn a stone into bread, to bow down to Satan in exchange for glory, and to demonstrate his power by throwing himself from the top of the Temple. Having resisted all these, Jesus returns home.

This is the first explicit, public event of Jesus’ ministry. He has come to bring good news to those who are so poor that they have nothing, good news to those at the very bottom of the heap; whose lives are little but bad news.<sup>1</sup>

He does this – after having been handed the scroll – by reading a passage from Isaiah and then proclaiming the scripture is fulfilled at that very moment; claiming that Jesus himself is the embodiment of the text, saying:

*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 captives go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*

According to the Old Testament, the year of the Lord’s favor – the year of Jubilee – is a time of release and reset. Every fifty years, God’s people are to observe a Sabbath of Sabbaths as liberty is proclaimed throughout the land. Jubilee is designed to transform society and undo the damage that human greed has caused: freeing people who have been enslaved because of debt; returning land to

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Jones from *WorkingPreacher.com*

its original owners so that everyone has a way of earning a living. Both land and people rest, and the people are to live off what the land produces itself.

In Luke's gospel, salvation is understood primarily in social and not individualistic terms. More specifically, for Luke salvation calls for a reversal in the social order. For example, in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus not only pronounces blessing on the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the rejected; he also pronounces woes on the rich, the filled, the laughing, and the respected. Those who are on the bottom of society experience this salvation with rejoicing while those on the top experience it as God's judgment and justice.<sup>2</sup>

Today, Jesus says, this prophecy of release, reset, and reversal is fulfilled. This sounds like good news to his hearers in Nazareth; at least if it is meant for them. When Jesus reminds them that God's love extends beyond their borders: that the prophet Elijah helped a woman from Sidon and the prophet Elisha healed a Syrian, they conclude that his message is really bad news. For, in order to accept his teaching, they would have to change their attitudes toward outsiders. They would have to include people they had excluded. They would have to believe that God's salvation is really for all flesh, and not just for them.

The summer before my senior year of high school, I was selected to participate in the *Governor's Scholar Program*: a six-week, annual gathering of 300 students from around the state of Kentucky to live and study together on a college campus. Among the first people I met there was Jubel – Jubel Lee Miller – really, his mother actually named him after this story in the Bible. Another, Debbie, was from Burnside, Kentucky; population 611. My roommate, Clint, was top of his high school class; a class of 16.

What I started to realize during that summer – and understand more fully in retrospect – is that the program really wasn't designed for me. Sure, I got to take part and it turned out to be a great experience, but the true intention was to give people like Jubel and Debbie and Clint a taste of something they couldn't imagine for themselves; to open their eyes to new possibilities that existed beyond their hometowns. I was just there to help.

Too often, we read this story in Luke – this first public event in Jesus' ministry – without following it all the way to the end; because there is less for us to feel good about in the second half of the passage. For, after his hometown crowd

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<sup>2</sup> O. Wesley Allen, "Commentary on Luke 4:14-30)

praises Jesus, he – in a sense – says to them, “Sorry, I didn’t mean you. The day of Jubilee really isn’t for you.”<sup>3</sup>

It may even seem as if Jesus is choosing to pick a fight with the people of his hometown. He brings up the things he has done in Capernaum – a neighboring town – presumably things like healing the sick and driving out demons. Surely, there are people in Nazareth with similar needs. Instead, Jesus announces that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown,” which appears to be the opposite of what has just happened. They were amazed at his words; everyone in the synagogue that day spoke well of him. They even said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?”

Jesus of Nazareth was one of their own. The people of his hometown wanted Jesus to give them something; something they thought they needed – maybe even deserved – but failed to consider whether it was really intended for someone else, someone who needed it more. Their closed perspective could not allow them to see that the good news was not only for them.

And how they turn on Jesus. Just as all of them had been amazed by his previous words, now every one of them were filled with rage, ready to toss him off a cliff. The gospels offer several cautionary tales about the dangerous power of mobs; especially those that don’t hear what they believe would be best for them. Somehow, miraculously or not, Jesus is able to escape the mob’s grip and go on his way.

Sometimes, we in the contemporary church also want to claim Jesus as our own. We profess our faith in Christ and strive to follow him in our individual and corporate lives. Yet, we need to be careful about claiming God’s allegiance to us over against others. It is important to remember that God’s salvation is being offered to everyone; and that sometimes proclaiming good news to the poor, the captive, or the oppressed can be uncomfortable to those who are rich, or free, or in positions of privilege; and that often, we belong to the latter group.

There is certainly nothing wrong with a congregation that has a local focus to its mission and ministry. When this focus turns inward, though; when they begin to believe their own interests are more important – more needed or more deserved – than others, the good news is constrained, and not proclaimed. The church is called to follow Christ into unfamiliar territory, offering aid to the poor and the oppressed, to widows and orphans, to the sick and the imprisoned. This

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr., *Bibleworm Podcast*

was Jesus' message from the beginning; it can also define the mission of the church today.

This incident with the people of his hometown also serves to free Jesus from an absolute allegiance to them. The late poet Maya Angelou wrote, "You are only free when you realize you belong no place – you belong every place." To the people of his hometown, Jesus was Joseph's kid. But, as a prophet, Jesus speaks the truth; and, sometimes, the truth can be difficult to hear. Sometimes, the good news means salvation for somebody else. Sometimes, we need to allow ourselves to be instruments – and not only recipients – of God's grace.

Therefore, let us learn from our spiritual ancestors and hear this as a cautionary tale against purely parochial interests. Our allegiance is not solely to one political party or leader. There is no branch or denomination of the Christian faith that is favored or preferred by Jesus. When we think and believe with closed minds and perspectives – when we act only according to our own interests – the potential for a mob mentality rises.

Yesterday, I received notice from the co-moderators of the Presbyterian Church, USA that churches could be potential targets of domestic terrorism between today and Wednesday, inauguration day. I hope and pray that this does not become a reality; that there are no attacks on churches or capital buildings or any other targets in the coming days. I pray that, as a country, we understand that violence is not the answer to whatever anger or grievance people are feeling.

And I pray, also, that – moving forward – our fractured nation's healing takes the form of proclaiming good news to those who are poor, and truly oppressed, and imprisoned in any way. I pray that the people and places that are overlooked or neglected might be renewed and rebuilt. I pray that we might become a nation of justice and fairness, of welcome and acceptance, of healing and hope. I pray for the day when we can understand that we belong to each place, and to each other. Amen.