

“Today!”
Luke 4:14-21
Sunday, January 24, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

Every four years the President of the United States gives the inaugural address. The purpose of this speech is the casting of the President’s vision or plan of action for the next four years. Listen to these excerpts, and see if you can guess which president spoke them:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

(Abraham Lincoln, 1865).

“This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself -- nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”

(Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933).

“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country. My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man.” (John F Kennedy, 1960).

“Let each of us now embrace, with solemn duty and awesome joy, what is our lasting birthright. With common effort and common purpose, with passion and dedication, let us answer the call of history, and carry into an uncertain future that precious light of freedom.”

(Barak Obama, 2013)

Today's gospel reading is Luke's version of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. We might say that Luke describes Jesus' inaugural sermon.

I. Jesus' sermon: his agenda (vv. 14-19).

In his book, Holy Sweat, Tim Hansel tells of another sermon. He writes about a guest preacher in a rather large church who began, "There are three points to my sermon." Most people yawned at the point. They'd heard that many times before. But he went on. "My first point is this. At this time there are approximately two billion people starving to death in the world." The reaction through the congregation was about the same, since they'd heard that sort of statement many times before, too. And then he said, "My second point..."

Everybody sat up. Only 10 or 15 seconds had passed, and he was already on his second point? He paused, then said, "My second point is that most of you don't give a damn!" He paused again as gasps and rumblings flowed across the congregation, and then said:

"And my third point is that the real tragedy among Christians today is that many of you are now more concerned that I said 'damn' than you are that I said two billion people are starving to death." Then he sat down.

James T. Garrett comments: "The whole sermon took less than a minute, but it is in many ways one of the most powerful ones ever given. He was reminding us we are called not to mere piety but to genuine morality. We are called to action, not to fancy words. Jesus preached a short sermon. But what a sermon! He clearly denotes the kind of ministry he came to pursue. It is to be a ministry to the poor and outcast, the blind and unaffirmed." (God's Gift, by James T. Garrett)

Jesus' sermon, given in Nazareth, is brief and amazing. He comes from his baptism and his 40 days of temptation in the wilderness. He comes from these two experiences "in the power

of the Spirit.”

He preaches to a hometown crowd. Having grown up in Nazareth, it makes sense that he would be expected to preach, and that the people would look forward to learning from him at their regular Saturday morning gathering. Nothing too surprising about that.

Jesus reads from Isaiah – also not a big surprise. The passage speaks of good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the captives, and liberty to those who are oppressed.

Jesus sits down, as is the custom of the day; the teacher would sit in the Moses Chair to teach the people. Nowadays we generally preach from a pulpit or a podium.

Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 and 58:6. This reading describes “the acceptable year of the Lord,” the jubilee year – forgiven debts, returned land, freed slaves, freedom from labor.

Still not too shocking. The people have heard of the jubilee year before; it is a part of the Hebrew scriptures. They have heard these readings from Isaiah before, as well as other readings about the year of jubilee.

The shocking moment comes after Jesus sits down. The people await his teaching, as they await the teaching every Saturday morning. Jesus summarizes the topic of his inaugural sermon by saying, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This is the beginning of the shock value of Jesus’ teaching in Nazareth.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today good news is given to the poor. Today the captives are released. Today the blind recover their sight. Today the oppressed go free.

How can Jesus have the gall to promise these things that he clearly can’t deliver? How can we, his followers, have the gall to believe and to proclaim these things? If Jesus can’t

deliver, how can we expect to do any better?

William G. Carter tells this story in his book, Praying for a Whole New World. It may help us to get a glimpse of what Jesus is getting at. Carter writes:

“Some of you have heard about Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farm in Georgia. He started a peanut farm and tried to run it the same way he thought Jesus would run it. He believed in a good wage for an honest day’s work. He believed in taking care of the land and those who work it. And he believed that all people — black and white — could work together and stand together. It was the early 1950s, and his local Baptist church did not agree with his thoughts on racial equality.

“One time, an agricultural student from Florida State University visited Koinonia Farm for the weekend. The student was from India, and said, ‘I’ve never gone to a Christian worship service. I would like to go.’ Clarence took him to Rehoboth Baptist Church, and it is reported that ‘the presence of his dark skin miraculously chilled the hot, humid southern Georgia atmosphere.’ It didn’t matter that he was from India. He had dark skin, not a red neck — and so he did not fit in. After worship, the pastor drove out to Jordan’s farm and said, ‘You can’t come with somebody like that. It causes disunity in our church.’ Jordan tried to explain, but the pastor wasn’t listening.

“Sometime later, a group of church leaders went out to the farm to plead with Clarence to keep undesirable people out of their church. As the story goes, Clarence promised to apologize before the congregation if somebody could prove he had done something wrong. Then he handed a Bible to a man in the group and said, ‘Can you tell me what sin I have committed by bringing a stranger to church?’

“The man slammed down the book and said, ‘Don’t give me any of this Bible stuff!’

“Clarence retorted, ‘I’m not giving you any Bible stuff. I’m asking you to give it to me.’

“The man and the others did not know what to say; so they slipped out. When they got back to the church, they wrote a letter and said, ‘Mr. Jordan, you are no longer welcome in our church, because you keep bringing in the wrong kind of people.’”

Maybe when Jesus preaches in Nazareth, he isn’t promising to do all the work himself. Maybe he is setting forth a vision for his followers. Maybe he is calling us to be courageous in living out his kingdom vision, as Clarence Jordan tries to do in the face of hostile opposition.

Maybe Jesus is asking us to see the possibility, to imagine the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, to imagine the enactment of the year of jubilee. Today.

II. Possibility:imagining the fulfillment (vv. 20-21).

If you’re anything like me, today’s passage of scripture can make you feel guilty. There is always more we can be doing, isn’t there? There is always more need in the world than we can possibly meet. At the same time, we know we could do more. But we have reasons why we don’t – we are dealing with many challenges: time, finances, health issues, family needs, personal needs, job demands, basic survival issues. It can make us feel a bit angry at Jesus. How can he place such heavy demands on us? Why doesn’t he just fix it all himself?

But of course that’s not how our deal with God works, is it? We have free will. He made us that way. We are in a relationship with him. He saves us through the work of Jesus on the cross; he loves us and empowers us through his Holy Spirit. Our job is to live out his vision, his plan for us. The plan is simple to understand, but difficult to live out. Jesus doesn’t promise that life as his followers will be easy. He only promises that he will be with us.

One way to bring about the jubilee year is to begin living as though it is already here. This means we forgive every debt that anyone owes us – monetarily and emotionally. Forgive

everyone who owes you. Forgive everyone who has hurt you.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes, in her book, Women Who Run With the Wolves, describes four stages of forgiveness: to forego – to leave it alone; to forebear – to abstain from punishing; to forget – to turn from memory, to refuse to dwell; and to forgive – to abandon the debt. To forego, or leave it alone. To forebear, or abstain from punishing. To forget, or turn from memory and refuse to dwell. To forgive, or abandon the debt.

This fourth stage of forgiveness, to abandon the debt, is the essence of the jubilee year, the essence of Jesus' sermon, the core of his ministry agenda.

Can we do this? Can we forego, forebear, forget and forgive? Can we abandon the debt? Can we do the hard work of truly forgiving those who have hurt us? Can we let go of the debts owed to us and truly forget?

To live as though the jubilee year is already here also means that we actively follow Jesus' kingdom vision as described in his inaugural sermon. We bring good news to the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed.

You may recognize the name of Eli Wiesel, the renowned Jewish theologian and prolific author. In his book, All Rivers Run To The Sea, he tells of his family, living in Hungary during the dark days of WWII. His family was waiting for their time to come, for the Nazis to arrive at their door and take them to labor camp.

He tells about a peasant woman by the name of Maria. Maria was almost like a member of the family. She was a Christian. During the early years of the war she continued to visit them, but eventually non-Jews were no longer allowed entrance to the ghettos. That did not deter Maria. She found her way through the barbed wire and she came anyway, bringing the Wiesels fruit, vegetables, and cheese.

One day she came knocking at their door. There was a cabin that she had up in the hills. She wanted to take the children, of which Eli was one, and hide them there before the SS came. They decided after much debate to stay together as a family, although they were deeply moved at this gesture. Wiesel writes of her:

“Dear Maria. If other Christians had acted like her, the trains rolling toward the unknown would have been less crowded. If priests and pastors had raised their voices, if the Vatican had broken its silence, the enemy's hand would not have been so free. But most thought only of themselves. A Jewish home was barely emptied of its inhabitants before they descended like vultures.

“I think of Maria often, with affection and gratitude,” he writes, “and with wonder as well. This simple, uneducated woman stood taller than the city's intellectuals, dignitaries and clergy. My father had many acquaintances and even friends in the Christian community, not one of them showed the strength of character of this peasant woman. Of what value was their faith, their education, their social position, if it did not arouse their love. It was a simple and devout Christian woman who saved the town's honor.”

None of us can know when and where and how we might be called upon to live out Jesus' mission statement. None of us know when we might be faced with the kinds of choices Maria faced. All we know is that we are called to be active in our faith. We are called to be ready and to actively seek out ways to bring good news to the poor.

Closing.

And as for those who are poor, captive, blind or oppressed, Jesus preaches a sermon of comfort and promise to you. A theologian once said that we should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. This is what Jesus' sermon accomplishes. He comforts those who are

suffering under tremendous burdens. At the same time, he challenges those of us who have it easy. We might not even be aware of how easy we have it, because we have never experienced the level of poverty and oppression that some folks endure as their daily lot in life.

Have you ever heard of “The Austin Lounge Lizards?” I don’t know much about them, except these song lyrics of theirs, which I hope you’ll enjoy:

“I know you smoke, I know you drink that brew / “I just can't abide a sinner like you
“God can't either, that's why I know it to be true / “That Jesus loves me -- but he can't stand you
“I'm going to heaven, boys, when I die / Cause I've crossed every ‘t’ and I've dotted every ‘I’
“My preacher tells me that I'm God's kind of guy/That's why Jesus loves me -- but you're gonna fry.”

Now that’s a funny song. I love it. It makes fun of the kinds of attitudes that we would never voice out loud, but that we might harbor in secret – that some folks just fit into Jesus’ kingdom more than others.

In his inaugural sermon, Jesus makes it clear that TODAY is the day when he puts an end to all that. TODAY is the day when the poor and the blind and the captive and the oppressed and the forgotten and the rejected are FIRST.

““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.’ ... TODAY this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

May Jesus’ words continue to comfort you when you need comfort, and afflict you when you need to be challenged. Amen.