



## *“The Mission”*

Nehemiah 8:1-10; Luke 4:14-21

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Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Like all Saturday mornings, Nazareth was quiet. It was Sabbath. No smells of food cooked in open ovens wafted over the village. All shops in the village were closed. The craftsmen’s tools were locked away. No one worked on the Sabbath. All over town, families prepared to go to the Synagogue. For centuries in Nazareth, that’s what people did on Saturday morning.

As people gathered at the Synagogue, they noticed that up front, Jesus, the young village carpenter, had taken the guest teacher’s seat. Nazareth was his hometown but he’d begun to make a name for himself in other villages as a lay teacher and preacher of unusual skill. This was the first time he’d preach in his home synagogue.

When the service began, no one would have guessed that what happened in the next hour would change the course of history.

The rabbi led the people in the traditional call to worship still used in synagogue worship, “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Then the congregation repeated the Ten Commandments, then prayed a traditional – and quite long – liturgical prayer still used in synagogues today.

Scripture readings from a lectionary followed. These scheduled reading included a reading from the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), then several of the Psalms, followed by a reading from the Prophets. The readings from the Hebrew Scripture were followed by a sermon in Aramaic, the language of the day. The sermon was an explanation and comment on one of the readings.

It was a tradition already over five centuries old. The Old Testament Lesson tells how the practice of public reading and sermonic explanation began. Now, twenty-five centuries later, every synagogue in the world and many churches will follow that same ancient custom.

Here I stand in that long tradition doing what in our time might seem a bit odd, even anachronistic. Yet it still seems to work, at least when done well. Several weeks ago, David Brooks wrote an op-ed piece in which he attempted to account for the disproportionate number of Jews who succeed in business, politics and economics. One answer, he suggests, is that Judaism is a faith that focuses on the mastering of written

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texts which teaches critical and interpretive skills and which fosters a powerful ambition to master those texts – and all of life.

And while preaching has its critics – and its poor practitioners – it is still true that most Protestant search committees rank preaching as the most desired trait in a new minister.

With Judaism, Christians believe that God is revealed in and through texts and the words that make up those texts. The biblical texts, we believe, possess unique life and potential. They work in the process of human transformation. Understanding the biblical texts is, therefore, critical to our faith and our spiritual formation.

In the Reformed tradition, the word stands central in the life of the church and the minister of the word, the parish pastor, is primarily a teacher of the church. In fact – a little known fact – the title Doctor is from the Latin word *docere* which means to teach. Until rather recently, “doctors” were ministers, the doctors – or teachers – of the church.

When believed and done well and with integrity, public teaching and preaching produce healthy congregations and spiritually formed Christians. It is, to be sure, a risky endeavor. Words can heal, build, and transform. And words can abuse, tear down, and destroy. Preaching done shabbily is an offense to God and sin against Christ’s church. But, done well, public proclamation of God’s word is a transforming communal experience. I’ve bet my life on it!

Back in Nazareth, when the reading from the Prophets was announced, Jesus stood and was presented the scroll of Isaiah by a lay official of the Synagogue called the *Hazzan*. He found the reading for the day, chapter 61, and, still standing, began to read – in Hebrew,

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

When he finished the reading, Jesus sat down, the customary position for teaching in the synagogue. He paused, then said, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

That’s a rather audacious claim for a 30-year-old carpenter, a layman who lacked higher education or theological training. And, as you might expect, Jesus’ bold sermon received a mixed review. Some were struck by the young man’s eloquence; others thought him supremely arrogant and presumptuous. Two thousand years later, Jesus still provokes similar mixed reviews.

Jesus’ sermon in Nazareth is a sort of inaugural address to his ministry. It’s placed at the

beginning of Luke's account of Jesus' life and teaching and serves as a thematic introduction to the prophet from Nazareth.

I assume Jesus' sermon was longer than a sentence – that Luke sums up the sermon in a sentence – and that the substance of its content is scattered through the next twenty chapters of Luke's gospel in stories, parables, and actions.

On the one hand, nothing in Jesus' sermon was new. He spoke from an ancient Hebrew text and the content of his message was the ancient promise of God to renew the earth. On the other hand what Jesus said was radically new. Today, now, here, in your presence, God's good news is fulfilled.

The point of the inaugural sermon is clear. I have some very good news from God. It is news that shatters the cultural status quo, defies conventional wisdom, and overthrows the existing religious order. The sermon announces a religious revolution still at work in the world – and far from fulfilled. And this good news speaks today, now, here, now.

God's good news elevates the poor – they stand on equal ground with everyone else. In the kingdom of God, there is no place for poverty. The character of God's work on earth precludes economic or social predators. Here none are cheated, and all are equal and have equal access to available resources.

Jesus' promise to the poor is an echo of the Jubilee Year from Leviticus. Every fifty years Israel created new opportunities for all to prosper. Debts were cancelled, land reverted to former owners, slaves were freed and, note this, the aliens in the land received a portion of the land and the wealth in it. Justice reigned supreme and equality was restored for another fifty years. Then, humans being humans, the Jubilee needed to return for the sake of justice and opportunity.

That is God's way in the world and it is the moral vision of the people of God – at least when we pay attention! David Tiede, former President of Lutheran Seminary and a New Testament scholar, writes:

Luke 4 is a justice text...indicating that Jesus is not merely God's way of being in the world, but Jesus is God's way of ruling the world....All who are eager to discern God's righteousness at work in the larger world, whether or not they believe in Jesus, may ponder the content of the Isaiah passage....It is not necessary to be a Christian to be caught up in the program of this reign....Those who cling to Jesus as Savior and Lord would do well to understand that the justice his kingdom is filled with has consequences for this world and for their role in it. The platform of Jesus' mission and the content of his call to discipleship are filled with God's passion for the outcast, the poor, the oppressed, and the lost.

Today, Jesus went on, I bring sight to the blind. This sight is larger than physical vision. One of the themes of the entire Bible is the spiritual and moral blindness of humanity – including conventional religion.

One of the sad and disturbing facts of religious life is the power of religion to dull moral vision. Jesus called the religious leaders of his day, "blind leaders of the blind," and "blind fools." Some religious leaders would rather see people poor and hungry than risk the security of their privilege. Some churches would rather die – and/or fight over trivial

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issues – than devote attention to what Jesus called “the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and love.”

“Today,” Jesus said, “commit to God’s agenda on earth. Now, not tomorrow.” Change is in order and it starts here and now. A new moral vision is part of God’s work on earth.

Jesus wasn’t finished yet. “I came to set the captives free, to proclaim release to the captives.” Participation in God’s work on earth sets us free from the numbing effects of self-interest and our often destructive egoism. The gospel sets us free to follow God’s passion for justice wherever it leads us – and it will lead us! “You will know the truth,” Jesus said, “and the truth will set you free.”

Because God’s people hear the voice of Jesus as the voice of their Lord, we are committed to the freedom of all captives, spiritual and physical.

I’ve tried to imagine what this room would have been like back in 1850 if Rev. Beecher read this text and commented on it. Jesus said, “I have come to set the captives free!” I imagine the room would have been electric with spiritual energy as this congregation collected its passion for freeing the slaves and turned it into political and social action.

That passion for freeing captives was sweeping the English-speaking world. The Wesleyan revival in England produced William Wilberforce and a passion for the abolition of slavery that poured over into America. With bold and imaginative action, abolitionists on both shores of the Atlantic set the captives free.

It’s worth noting that the 19th century abolitionists were the Evangelicals of the day. They were revivalists who believed knowing God meant doing God’s will. The religious establishment of the day was passive. Beecher, who began his ministry as a revivalist, was no favorite of the religious establishment.

I am sad to say that modern day slavery seems to be getting the same passive response from the establishment. The January 18th issue of *Time* claims that there are more slaves in the world today than any time in history. Many modern slaves are part of the growing sex traffic of young women and children.

North Avenue Presbyterian Church in Atlanta was shocked to learn that Atlanta is a center of modern sex trafficking and slavery, especially the sex traffic in children. They decided to act. Older women in the congregation offered rooms in their homes as safe havens for recovery. Young people begged for opportunities to form rescue teams. Still others volunteered their skills in counseling, law and organizational development.

In partnership with other faith-based groups in the city, they launched a citywide ministry called Street Grace. Churches that otherwise would never find common cause joined to fight for justice for the sexually oppressed in Atlanta. The pastor, Rev. Scott Weimer, writes, “the good news of which Isaiah and Jesus speak is bringing release to modern day captives on our very corner and in our city.”

Today, Jesus said, join me in God’s cause in the world. Don’t form a study group, do something. Don’t contemplate justice in the world. Make justice. Jesus’ call is always a call to personal decision. It requires following him in an act of personal faith that will take us on a long journey in the direction of God’s mission in the world. Are you willing to give your life to a cause beyond yourself, God’s cause? Amen

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