

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be acceptable in your sight,

O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

Psalm 19.14

What is “the Good News”?

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany

January 31, 2016

Andrew Smeltz

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ on this fourth Sunday after Epiphany. I think Epiphany is one of those things in the Church’s traditions that gets overlooked by most of us. It’s the liturgical season that comes immediately after the overwhelming beauty and insane rush of Christmas and before Lent, the 40 days of contemplation and penitence that cause us to reflect on the eventual crucifixion of our Lord (and our relationship to those events). Epiphany’s length varies depending on when Easter falls. This year it’s very short. The name Epiphany is also a very “churchy” word, or I should say ecclesiastical. We almost never use it elsewhere. Epiphany means “a sudden,

intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something, usually initiated by some simple, commonplace occurrence or experience. An Epiphany can also be an appearance or manifestation, especially of the divine.” This is exactly what the season of Epiphany is in the Church year. The season of Epiphany is when we find out who Jesus is. The stories of this season reveal Jesus’ identity. If we pull a few of these images from our texts this Epiphany we see Jesus revealed as the Jewish Messiah, Son of God, shepherd of Israel (which in ancient Israel is code for King. Remember King David, the shepherd who slew the giant Goliath and eventually became the greatest king of Israel), other images that are used to reveal who Jesus is: priest, prophet, miracle-worker, healer, teacher, fulfillment of hope, one who suffers on our behalf, and savior. These are all images taken directly out of our Bible readings during these weeks of Epiphany.

The events of our Epiphany readings are not chronological. They are revelatory. They shine a light on Jesus. We begin with Magi who, like us, are not Jewish but are following God’s signs seeking the Christ child. The next week we hear the story of John baptizing Jesus in the River Jordan, and the Holy Spirit as a beautiful dove descends upon Jesus. And a voice from heaven pronounces, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We have his first miracle, as he turns water into fine wine at the wedding in Cana. In the last two weeks’ readings we see Jesus, who brings healing and justice to all who suffer. And in a

couple weeks we will see Jesus transfigured, transformed, before us with Peter, John, and James – radiant, fully revealed in the Glory of God as the one who will bring about God’s dominion, God’s Holy Kingdom on Earth. During Epiphany, we see before us God’s revelation – God revealing -- of Godself in the person of Jesus Christ. And the question we are left with is “how do we, as faithful disciples, respond to the Jesus Christ revealed before us?”

Today’s reading is part two of Jesus return to his home and his first sermon to his home congregation. He has just returned to his home village of Nazareth filled with the power of the Spirit after having faced 40 days of temptations in the wilderness. Imagine Nazareth. It’s about as small as a village can be (and still be called a village), maybe 50 small homes made of local rough-hewn stone. Nazareth was a Jewish village of subsistence farmers and laborers like Joseph and his son Jesus. The village was under Roman occupation and only four miles from Herod’s great city of Sepphoris, where Joseph would have likely found work as a day-laborer at King Herod’s massive building projects. The village synagogue would have been a small, single-room building with stone benches along the walls, just big enough for a couple dozen people to meet for prayer and listen to readings from the Torah on the Sabbath.

In this small stone room Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolls the scroll and finds these verses and reads

"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."

Then Jesus rolls up the scroll, sits down, and beginning to preach he says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is Jesus' first sermon in the Gospel of Luke. Here Luke gives us a central principle or theme of the Gospel. From the beginning of the Gospel, Luke emphasizes that Jesus' work is to serve the poor¹, and in his first sermon Jesus summarizes who he is and what his mission will be.

He claims to be anointed by God, chosen to fulfill God's promises. Yet Jesus does not promise violent rebellion against Roman rule or a violent peasant uprising against the oppressive ruling classes. He does not belong to the ruling class. He is not a Priest of the Temple. Nor is he a Pharisee, a scholar of the Torah. He has no power that is visible to anyone that he can do what he promises. We only know the

¹ (Taylor, 2009) p 286

truth of his statement with the benefit of seeing his entire ministry and the church that grew following his resurrection.

Luke does not emphasize ceremonial displays of righteousness or piety. Instead the gospel underscores acts of human compassion and social justice. The question is not “What does God demand for righteousness?” Instead Jesus demands that we ask “Who needs compassion and help?”²

“Recovery of sight to the blind” we think that it is someone else who is blind and who needs healing, but it is we who are blind to the needs of our neighbors. By serving the needs of the community and bringing God’s Dominion to life through caring for those who are most in need, Jesus poses an alternative to the idols of inflexible doctrine. The way of Jesus brings lush new life out of the hard, scorched, cracked dry ground of life lived without hope, without healing for the sick, without equality for women, people of every class, color, sexual orientation, or social outcasts, without care for widows and orphans, and without inclusion in community for refugees and strangers. Just as Jesus reads from Isaiah, Jesus draws inspiration from the Torah, the prophets, and other writings of the Hebrew scriptures. Over and over again the prophets called Israel back to God’s commands to care for the orphan, widow, stranger, the poor, the outcast, the lame, and marginalized – the weakest and most vulnerable of Israel’s society. Jesus sees

² Ibid.

himself as the inheritor of this tradition and draws on it throughout his ministry.

The way of Jesus brings nourishment and life-giving water to everyone who thirsts for compassion. Jesus Christ brought faith in God's promise of abundance and justice for all people.

Jesus declares that his ministry is to bring "good news" to the poor. What could be "good news"? The good news is the fulfillment of God's promise of compassion and rescue to the poor, to those in need, those who suffer, to bring liberation, freedom to prisoners, those who are enslaved, held captive and oppressed. We cannot be free if not every person is free. Can we truly have freedom without the responsibility of offering mercy, dignity, and freedom to every person?

Jesus will fulfill God's promise to restore sight to the blind, healing to those who suffer from illness and disease, wholeness to the disabled and maimed, and new life to the dying -- even to those who have already died. As though crying out from Mount Zion, Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. The year of Jubilee: God's command from the Torah that there would be a time of total forgiveness of debt and sin, the arrival of God's salvation from crushing oppression.

In a few short verses Jesus speaks in a language of story from Israel's past. The scroll, the book, of Isaiah tells the story of the Israelite people returned from

exile in distant lands to their homeland, Israel. The few people gathered around Jesus as he preached would have heard with hope the story that God's promise would someday be fulfilled. Although they were in Israel, this story would have promised rescue from Roman occupation and the crushing poverty of imperial rule. The same story, decades later would speak to Luke's audience of early Christians first listening to stories of our Messiah who had brought new life even amidst oppression and persecution. This is the same story that we now hear as though we are sitting on the smooth stone benches of the 1st century synagogue listening to Jesus speak for the first time.

How do we respond to Jesus proclamation of liberation for all of God's people, for God's promise of justice for all people? His home congregation is full of anger. They hear Jesus proclaim good news, but they want proof. They want signs and miracles that Jesus is the prophet he claims to be, and they hear, with anger, his declaration that his ministry is directed to **all**. So, they respond with anger, and as a group they rise up and try to kill him. Jesus' ministry begins with the proclamation of good news; his proclamation is ultimately rejected; and the crowd attempts to kill him. This foreshadows how Jesus' ministry will unfold, and it foreshadows the journey we will begin in a few weeks through Lent. Jesus' proclamation of God's promise in which the poor inherit God's kingdom, in which

the hungry are filled, and in which the powerful are pulled down ultimately will lead him to the cross, where it will lead us as well if we follow.

Perhaps the most disturbing part of this passage is that Jesus does not do any miracles in his hometown. Why should *they* not benefit from Jesus' ministry? Do they feel entitled? Do we feel entitled? Do we think that Jesus should do ministry for the church first? For us first? Do we think that help should only go to people who we think deserve help? Or, do we share with Jesus his concern for the marginalized and vulnerable and for those beyond the boundaries of St. Andrew's?³

In his first sermon delivered in a small stone synagogue in Nazareth 2,000 years ago, Jesus tells us exactly what the core of his ministry will be and where we must follow if we are to follow him. So we must ask ourselves, "Where are the needs of our community?" "Who is in pain?" "To whose suffering are we blind?" Then we must go out and **do the work together** to help bring about the year of the Lord's favor. Amen.

³ (Reese, 2016)