

(Luke 4:14-21

TO BE CONTINUED

I'm not sure if this story is true or if it's apocryphal; if it's the latter, then it's one of those stories that, if it isn't true, it should be! Anyway, the story is told of President Lincoln, in the depths of the Civil War, visited the New York Presbyterian Church for a mid-day service. This occasional practice was a respite for him during the difficult years of the horrible War Between the States. Lincoln would slip in late by a side door and sometimes leave early without being noticed. One day, when he and his aide visited the church, the president lingered there in his private corner long after the other worshipers had gone. His aide finally asked, "Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon today?" Mr. Lincoln said, "I thought it was eloquent, well thought out, and powerfully delivered." "Then you liked it?" the aide continued trying to fill the silence. "No. It failed," the president went on, "it did not ask of us something great."

For the time being, I want you to hold on to that illustration and the thought that the sermon "did not ask of us something great." We'll return to that idea in just a bit. Now then, let us turn our attention to the scripture lesson for today.

Just prior to launching his public ministry, Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan River and he had been tempted by the devil in the wilderness. Now, Jesus' time was at hand. He returned to Galilee and began to teach in the synagogues where all praised him. Jesus came to his hometown of Nazareth, and he went to the synagogue as he usually did. There, Jesus was given the scroll containing the words of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll until he found the words he was looking for, then he stood (as a sign of reverence for the Word) and read: "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 sat down to teach those present and he began by saying, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In a very real sense, Jesus was setting forth his mission statement. He provided a glimpse of just what kind of Messiah he would be. While the common expectation was that the Messiah would come on the scene as the conquering hero, who would rout the Roman oppressors and free Israel, Jesus was setting forth another agenda (in fact, God's agenda) as Messiah. Jesus reached back hundreds of years to the time of Isaiah's prophecy, and he found the job description that he was looking for, the plan he was going to put into action. And, sure enough, what Isaiah said was precisely what Jesus did for the next several years. Jesus worked nonstop to restore individuals and communities to wholeness and to reunite them with God.

Jesus brought good news to the poor: like the widow whose son had died, and the woman who had spent all of her money in vain on physicians, or the hungry crowds on the hillside whom he fed with bread and fish. Jesus proclaimed release to the captives: like the man held captive by the demon, the paralyzed man, the ten lepers, or those who were captive to their own greed for money like Zacchaeus. Jesus set them all free. Jesus brought recovery of sight to the blind: sometimes Jesus did this literally as he did with the blind man alongside the road to Jericho. But, more often than not, Jesus opened the eyes of everyone he taught to look at God in a new and different light so they could understand God's will. Jesus brought freedom to the oppressed: like the woman who was

trapped in a life where people used and despised her and at the same time labeled her the sinner, until she came to him and washed his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair and he lifted her to her feet again and told her about the love and grace of God. And, Jesus proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor: the great Jubilee that took place every fifty years, when every debt was forgiven, every piece of foreclosed land returned to its original owner, and every slave was freed. The great Jubilee was a symbol of God's forgiveness, a taste of God's reign. In a very real sense, Jesus was a traveling Jubilee, proclaiming "liberty throughout the land."

In the passage for today, Jesus made it clear what he was about to do, and then he went and did it! Furthermore, to ensure that he brought good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor, Jesus died on the cross for all to take away the sin of the world, and he was raised from the dead and gave new, abundant, and eternal life on both sides of the grave to all who would receive God's grace revealed in him. Sitting there in the synagogue at Nazareth, having just read these words from Isaiah, and looking into the future at his own ministry, death and resurrection, it's no wonder then that Jesus exclaimed, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And now, it's time to retrieve the opening story about President Lincoln and his comment about the sermon that day and how the sermon failed because "it did not ask of us something great." In Jesus' first sermon preached at his hometown synagogue, Jesus asks of us something great. By taking these words of liberation and salvation from Isaiah and embracing them as his own mission and identity, Jesus asks us to carry on his work in the world. What Jesus began, his disciples are called to continue. All throughout the gospel and the story of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles, when Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled," today is never allowed to become "once, a long time ago." No, today means precisely that: today! Today we all are called to be disciples of the Lord and to carry on Jesus' ministry to and for the world.

Our Mission Statement, which is "Share God's love, embrace our neighbors, nurture each other," says basically what Jesus read from Isaiah that day in the synagogue. Called and sent by Jesus Christ we bring good news to the poor: that good news may come in the form of Angel Tree or Butterfly Tree gifts to needy families, or contributions of spaghetti sauce and pasta to Grace Network, or our benevolence monies spread out all over the area (including Haiti). We proclaim release to the captives when we fund a jail ministry, or allow Narcotics Anonymous to meet here twice a week. We recover the sight of the blind as we donate old eyeglasses for someone in a third world country to see better, help a child or illiterate adult to read, or educate ourselves and others so that we remain open to all people rather than live with old, sinful prejudices. We let the oppressed go free whenever we share the good news with others, and with the Holy Spirit's help, lead them to repent and receive God's forgiveness or give them hope to live fully both in this world and the next.

Jesus' ministry is to be continued in our lives because, in our own baptisms, "the Spirit of the Lord is upon us" as well and enables and empowers us to serve others. We are called to embody the good news as Jesus did by allowing the Spirit to anoint us as we go forth to live out our lives each day, in whatever capacity. We are, quite simply, to live in such a manner that the unconditional love of God, revealed in Jesus Christ, is a reality to the world.

Let me bring this sermon to a close by telling two brief stories that seem to sum up "the something great," which Jesus asks us to do in order to continue his ministry.

An old story is told about a man who came to a Quaker meeting and was puzzled because everyone was just sitting there in silence. After waiting patiently for a long time for something to happen, he finally whispered to the person sitting next to him: "When does the service begin?" The answer came back: "When we leave."

And, George MacLeod, the founder of the modern Iona Community in Scotland, told the story of a boy, who threw a stone at a stained-glass window, which depicted the Incarnation. The rock busted out the "E" in the word "HIGHEST" in the text "GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST." Thus, for better or worse until the window was fixed, it read, "GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGH ST." You need to know that in Britain, the phrase "High Street" was equivalent to the American phrase, "Main Street" or Martinsville's "Commonwealth Boulevard, Spruce Street," or wherever you are.

Let us continue Jesus' agenda and do God's will, with the help of the Holy Spirit, by extending Christ's ministry out to the highways and byways of our cities and towns and counties. When we live out Jesus' own mission statement by embodying the good news, loving and serving others, and proclaiming (by our words and our deeds) that this really is the year of the Lord's favor, then we will surely give "Glory to God in the highest" (and on the High St.) - in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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