

Epiphany 3 / January 23, 2022

Luke 4:18

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives.”

In our gospel last week Jesus gave His first sign at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. John centered his gospel on seven signs by which Jesus showed Himself to be the Messiah, the Son of God and Saviour. Luke begins his gospel with Jesus attending worship in the synagogue at Nazareth, reading from Isaiah and claiming to be the Messiah promised in the reading. The response was overwhelming. The congregation rose up, seized Him, dragged Him out of the church, drove Him out of their town with the intention of throwing Him off a cliff. Jesus' first miracle in the gospel of John was changing water into wine. His first sign in the gospel of Luke was passing through their midst and going His way. It was a miracle He wasn't killed!

Have you ever been asked to leave? The response of the synagogue to Jesus seems wildly disproportionate to His words. What did He say that caused such instant anger and intense rage? Was it because He claimed the words of Isaiah and claimed to be the Messiah? People might have thought He was a dreamer and was getting too big for His britches, as the saying goes. But if that were the case, they could simply have laughed at Him and let it go at that. What makes them so angry that they are mad enough to kill Him? This isn't some itinerant preacher, a stranger who wandered into their synagogue on a Saturday. They have known Him from childhood. His father was the town carpenter. He probably helped build half the houses in the town. They try to throw Him off a cliff!

The gospel writers frame Jesus' ministry in certain ways, in order to highlight specific aspects of His person and His ministry. John frames Jesus' ministry in seven signs, which lead to the greatest sign, the sign of the cross. Luke frames Jesus' ministry with His rejection at Nazareth, which leads to His rejection by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Jesus' ministry begins with rejection by His own townspeople, an act of violence and attempted murder. His ministry is fulfilled with His final rejection by His own people and the ultimate act of violence, His death on the cross.

What does this mean? What does Luke want us to see? Jesus' death was ultimately good. It fulfilled the mission of the Messiah, which Jesus claimed in the synagogue at Nazareth. In the words of Isaiah chapter 53, “He was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace and with His stripes we are healed.” This is the good news of the gospel. This is the essence of the gospel. The challenge for us and for everyone who hears the gospel is whether we will accept this gospel, receive Jesus in our hearts or drive Him out. This gospel challenges us to believe in Jesus with understanding and to follow Him consciously and intentionally in the way of the cross.

Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor and liberty to the captives. Sadly, most people didn't want the riches He gave, or the liberty He offered. Luke shows Jesus as the fulfillment of the words of the prophets and His life as a pattern of their ministry. In the synagogue Jesus said, “No prophet is acceptable in his hometown.” This wasn't simply foreshadowing about His own fate. It was a statement of fact, found throughout Israel's history. The only prophets who were acceptable in Israel were the ones who prophesied falsely in the Lord's name. The prophets who spoke the truth of God's word, calling people to repentance and faithfulness to Him and His covenant, were rejected, mistreated and sometimes killed. People responded to them with violence, because they didn't like what they said.

People didn't like what Jesus said either. In this synagogue they were particularly angry for reminding them of God's favour to Gentiles in Old Testament times, while the widows and lepers of Israel went unfed and uncleansed. Why did God extend kindness to a Sidonian woman and a Syrian commander, while seeming to turn His face from the suffering of His own people? It was because, He found faith in those people and none among His own people. God values nothing more highly than that we take His words to heart and believe them with all our heart.

The reason there was a famine in the days of Elijah, was because the people refused to listen to the Lord and instead listened to the false prophets, who encouraged them to worship gods who were supposed make them rich and keep them well fed. The famine was a call to repent, to turn to the Lord and follow in faithfulness, according to His words spoken through Moses and the prophets. Where did Jesus find faith? Jesus found faith in the same places. A Roman commander who sent servants to seek healing for another servant, believing that Jesus' words would heal instantly, without Him even being present. Jesus marvelled and said, “I tell you, not even in Israel

have I found such faith.” Jesus wants us to have faith, to confess Him as the Christ in accordance with the scriptures, believe with all our heart and conform our lives to that faith.

Jesus did many things that benefited people physically. He cleansed people of leprosy. He healed people of injury and disability. He gave sight to the blind. He cured people of disease and illness. He fed thousands. He raised the dead! But the greatest benefit He gave was of the spirit. All those physical benefits were in time and only for a time. They identified Him as the Messiah, who feeds our spirits with the bread of eternal life. They showed Him to be the Great Physician who heals the wounds of our souls caused by sin. They revealed Him as Saviour, who sets us free from the control of sin and the condemnation of eternal death.

Whatever physical burdens, sufferings, afflictions and disabilities we bear in our lives, nothing is more important than receiving the spiritual benefits Jesus gives; forgiveness of sins, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the promise of resurrection to eternal life. Jesus doesn't promise to remove the burdens from our lives. He promises to stand with us. He promises to help us bear them. He promises to work His good through them. He promises to take them away forever in the blessing of eternal life. He wants us to believe Him at every stage and take His words to heart, in every circumstance of life. He is faithful unto death and beyond death. We may forsake Him, but He will never leave or forsake us.

Well, so what! If that's our response, its not good. It's better to get so mad that we want to drag Him out and force Him away. That's something He can work with. The name Israel means to wrestle or struggle with God. Wrestle with God, but let Him win. We win when He wins. Struggle to understand His word. There's always something to learn. There's always something we never noticed before. There's always something that never struck us that way previously. There's always a meaning we missed. There's always something we've forgotten. There's always a promise to hear again. When it comes from our thoughts and expectations, hope is always uncertain. Promises from God's word are more solid than the earth beneath our feet and more certain than the rising of the sun each morning. We can never hear the promises of God's word too much or too often. His word gives us real and living hope!

Let His word anger, rebuke and chastise you! His word is supposed to call us to repentance. His word is supposed to reveal our sins. His word is supposed to tell us things about ourselves that we don't like and don't want to hear. Don't worry, it won't make Him mad. Jesus didn't express any anger at His fellow Nazarenes when they kicked Him out of town. Now He had something to work with. Let Him work in you! When we allow His word to work in us, good things happen. When we allow His word to show us our sins, He shows Himself to be our Saviour. His word forgives us, heals us, improves us. His word leads us in paths of righteousness. His word will bring us to the light of everlasting life.

Jesus speaks to our gathering today. He says to us, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor (The good news of forgiveness, peace with God and eternal life). “He sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives (liberty from the captivity of hoping for more pleasure, more money, more things). “Recovery of sight to the blind” (so we would look beyond life's delusion and see Him as the light of life). “To set at liberty the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (to free us from bondage to the world, the devil, the desire of the flesh, so we may live in the glorious freedom of God's children in time and for eternity.

Jesus fulfilled these words first with His cross and resurrection. He will fulfill these words also in all who believe. God always grant us faith to believe and support our faith, until faith passes into sight in our share of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In His Name. Amen