

Luke 4:14-30
Expansive Good News
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I would like to begin by telling you about a time in my life when I received a great honor. I was just out of college, and had recently begun working as a Youth Ministry intern in the Church that raised me. This was an exciting time. As a ripe old 22-year-old I was now a shepherd in training for crowd of High Schoolers. To borrow an idea from Mark Twain, I know they were all looking at me and thinking how much wisdom I had gained in a few short years at college. And near the end of my time as the intern extraordinaire, the Senior Pastor invited me into his office. What could this mean? I bet he was inviting me in to inform me that he was retiring and that he wanted me to be his successor.

Not quite. But he did offer me one of the greatest privileges of my life that day, the chance to preach my first sermon in front of my home congregation. Now I would like to tell you that my 22-year-old wisdom caused the congregation to say, is this not Greg's son?—as they marveled at my masterful stem-winding. They did not. I'm not even quite sure that what they endured was exactly good news. But it certainly was something.

Good news, what the Bible calls Gospel, is good not just because of what it says to those who are eager and ready to hear it. It is good news because of what it says about the world that God is recreating. Jesus was on a mission to paint as vivid and potent a picture of God's Kingdom and reign, and when you're the hometown crowd that's a spellbinding message. They were a shoo win, shooting fish in a barrel. Until he started talking about the scope and vision of that Kingdom, now it's something entirely different. The Kingdom of God will always lead us beyond our perceptions of God's Kingdom Community.

To get a sense of what Jesus means I want to invite you to open your bibles once again to Luke's Gospel, we're marking time in God's Word through the Gospel of Luke. Last week we read of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness, today we pick up at the beginning of his ministry in the region of Galilee. And as you are able I'd like to invite you to stand with me, out of reverence and respect, for the reading of God's Word.

And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.¹⁷ And the

scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,

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

and recovering of sight to the blind,

to set at liberty those who are oppressed,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, “Today this

Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² And all spoke well of him and marveled

at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, “Is not

this Joseph's son?” ²³ And he said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this

proverb, “Physician, heal yourself.” What we have heard you did at Capernaum, do here in your hometown as well.” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in

his hometown. ²⁵ But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of

Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three years and six months, and a great famine

came over all the land, ²⁶ and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath, in the

land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. ²⁷ And there were many lepers^[a] in Israel in

the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the

Syrian.”²⁸ When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath. ²⁹ And

they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on

which their town was built, so that they could throw him down the cliff. ³⁰ But passing

through their midst, he went away.

This was an exciting moment for the people of Nazareth, for more reasons than one. Not only was one of their own getting up to preach, but Jesus, Joseph and Mary's son, was reading from the Prophet Isaiah no less. All those people who talked down about Nazareth, saying “what good could come from a small town?” We're now being vindicated, Jesus is talking about us, things are comin' up Nazareth. And this is true. This is what Isaiah is about.

This passage from Isaiah that Jesus read from comes from a series of chapters from the great prophet called the Servant Chapters. Isaiah wrote to the people of Israel at their time of greatest darkness. Dragged from their homeland into captivity in Babylon, where they—above all—lost their identity. In Isaiah there are many many chapters that depict this grim future under the rule of another.

But every once and a while Isaiah will speak out, about a time when these tired, beaten down, dragged around, looked down upon people would see the light of their vindication. Have you ever experienced a period of intense difficulty in your life, where it felt like everything was a struggle, things weren't the way you wanted them to be, and it was a challenge to hope in the face of your situation? Probably all of us. And do you remember what it felt like having someone speak words of hope or promise into your situation. And do you remember how in that moment it felt perhaps to you like the weight of the world was being lifted, or comfort like a healing balm was washing over you. Do you know this feeling?

This is what Isaiah is speaking in chapters 60-62. In our reading Jesus is quoting Isaiah 61:

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
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This is Israel's story, this is the hope of a restored homeland, Jerusalem rebuilt, farmland replanted, groves of trees heavy with figs, and olives; their temple (Holy Place) rebuilt as the center of life. This is the great dream they all had. And as Jesus preached these words from Isaiah the people of Nazareth were saying yes and amen, go ahead, preach. And the Presbyterians in the group were silently and motionlessly assenting because they didn't want to disrupt others hearing. Poor, oppressed, blind, captive, this is their history, and he is speaking about one who will come and set things to right for them.

Do you know what it is like to have a message with that potency, that magnitude, be spoken directly into your situation? Have you ever felt the experience of any of these conditions poor, blind, captive, oppressed? Perhaps not immediately, but if we look deep within our spiritual lives I'm sure that everyone of us can. When that message goes out we want to say, yes someone who knows me, who gets me. This is my guy, he's speaking to my needs, my longings, my heartaches.

And after Jesus finishes reading the scripture lesson for the day, he quietly rolls up the scroll and gives his first sermon. These are really the first words of Jesus public ministry: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus doesn't say, remember the good ol' days when this is what it was like—that one hot minute in Eden. He also doesn't say, someday when we all get to heaven this will be true. Jesus says today. This is God's message to you today. The Kingdom of God begins today. Heaven starts now when the poor have good news preached to

them, when captive people receive liberty, when blind folks are given their sight back, when oppressed people are set free. This happens today.

I think this is the challenge for us as followers of Jesus, how are we allowing the Kingdom to become visible and real among us today?

Now at this point Jesus has the congregation all whipped up into a lather. They are nodding, they are tracking with him, they are saying yes and amen, and hallelujah. And some of them say, “hey isn’t that Joseph’s boy? My how proud he’s made us...what a great pastor to us he’ll make.” And we’re going to be his special people. Hey Jesus, show us some of the things we have heard you did at Capernaum.

One of the dangerous snares that lies before us is the mindset that believes: Jesus may care about everyone, but we’re his favorite. Do you know this mentality? It comes in more subtle forms in our tradition, we have such a thoughtful rational handle on our theology and understanding of the Bible, surely God notices what great Christians we are. The people of Nazareth assumed that their proximity and familiarity with Jesus entitled them to a certain status. But Jesus is the end of ethnocentrism.

Jesus goes on to use two Old Testament Prophets to illustrate his point. The first is a reference to a story from 1 Kings 17 when God’s word came to Elijah and send him to Zaraphath, a city that was up north in Phoenician country and was the center of Baal worship. There he’s sent to the home of a woman and her ill son, and while Elijah is there the son dies. What have you against me O man of God? But Elijah, takes the boy and stretches himself out over him and raises him to life.

Again, in 2 Kings 5, Elisha is sent to the home of the commander of a foreign army Naaman, and there he proclaims good news by healing this foreigner, someone who was not particularly liked by the Israelites.

Two examples of this Good News going out. But interestingly, Jesus didn’t give examples of healings in Israel—even though there were many to speak of. But he told of God’s presence going out to foreigners—one who was a nameless foreign woman and her son, the other to an enemy general.

And when they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

It can be confusing and even maddening when God blesses and heals and loves the people we don’t want him to love and heal and bless. In fact the last defense when our worldview is challenged is to lash out in anger. The crowds were so blinded by their own zeal and anger that

when they reached the edge of the cliff and Jesus mysteriously and elusively passes through them—moving on to the next ministry—all they can see is the danger that lies before them. This is the danger of believing that God’s message is for one but not another, the life of lies and self-deception are like a cliff we walk right up to.

The beauty about the ministry of Jesus Christ is that he turns our comfortable ideas about the Kingdom of God upside down. As I said earlier, Jesus is the end of ethnocentrism, he is the end of racism, he is the end our questioning the value and worth of the other.

The good news in this passage is that God in Jesus Christ comes near to you, AND ALSO comes near to all who have ears to hear. ILLUSTRATION OF ALL Y’ALL

God is the God who is longing to be in relationship with you. He is the God who is intimately concerned with your hopes and heartaches. He is the God who went to the cross and died for you. But when he said, it is finished it wasn’t just your sin that was carried away, it wasn’t just your need to be known that was met, it wasn’t just your need to feel safe in God. It was everyone’s. One of my favorite passages from the New Testament is from 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul says that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

And because we know that Christ has come for us, made us safe in his deep and abiding love for us, we can go now go out and boldly and confidently love the world He loves so dearly and do His work for ALL – from the prostitute to the city council member.

Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in all y’all’s hearing. Amen.