

Gracious Words

Text: Luke 4:14-22a

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Imagine being in the congregation that day. Along with others in the village of Nazareth, according to custom, you head to the synagogue for worship. You enter the synagogue with a certain expectation of what will transpire. Things progress normally. The congregation recites the Shema, the prayer you know so well and which you've recited at least twice a day for as long as you can remember. It's a declaration of faith in one God.

(Recited with eyes covered)

***She-ma yisrael, adonai eloheinu, adonai echad
Hear O' Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One***

(This verse is followed by one line of text that is traditionally recited quietly, as if to just oneself)

***Baruch shem kavod malchuto l'olam va-ed
Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever***

The Shema continues to its end, and the worship moves on to prayers while facing Jerusalem, with an "Amen" response from the gathered congregation. Next is the reading from sections of the scrolls from the Torah and the Prophets. You've heard it before, but not like this. The words are familiar, but something in the reading seems new. You look at the man who is reading from the scroll. He looks familiar—there's something you recognize in him. You know you've seen him before but, again, something seems different so you aren't quite sure that he is who you think he is.

You look around and realize you aren't the only one. Everyone seems to realize something unusual is happening. No one can take their eyes off him. They're staring at him...in awe...in wonder...with suspicion...with fear. You read this range of emotions crossing the faces of all who cannot seem to look away. The man somehow seems to have cracked open the words written on the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. It's more than just the gracious words, though...

He leaves the reading platform, returns the scroll and sits down. But, the congregation isn't ready to move forward with the sermon, which is normally what comes next.

You wonder if, perhaps, the man feels compelled to say aloud what the worshipers are thinking silently... because after a moment, he begins to speak.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Wait, what?! Jesus' words astound you and everyone around you.

You're suspended in the moment, wondering: What just happened?



The meticulous pace of Luke's narration signals the importance of this moment. Action slows, every motion is described. Luke writes that Jesus "went" in and "stood up to read." The scroll "was given" to him. He "unrolled" it. He "found" the place from which he wished to read (vv. 16-17). This creates suspense and draws attention to the verses that follow.

When discussing this with Michael (our Bridge Senior Pastor) the other day, he pointed out that the Tuesday night bible study group observed the way in which the verses form a frame around the reading from Isaiah. In verses 16-17 Jesus stands, he is handed the scroll, and he unrolls it. In v. 20, the order is inverted: he rolls up the scroll, he hands it to the attendant, and he sits. These actions perhaps stress that Jesus' reading from Isaiah is the climactic moment.

We know the moment didn't last long. In fact, next week we'll hear more about the terrible turn of events which occurred immediately following. But for now, there is this very profound, very important moment. Everyone knew it. Everyone experienced it. It was powerful! It was transcendent.

I would describe it as one of those moments we human beings experience as a "thin place" when we're close to God, when God's Spirit is undeniable.

I think the Holy Spirit – not Jesus - is really the star of the show here. Understanding the context of this passage is important to understanding why.

First, the Spirit had descended upon Jesus at his baptism while he was praying (3:22). At the start of chapter 4 Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" and "was led by the Spirit in the wilderness" (4:1) where he is said to have been tempted by the devil (4:2) but refused to be lured by power and spectacle (4:8-12). Today we hear that Jesus returns to Galilee "filled with the power of the Spirit" (4:14) and reads from Isaiah that "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (4:18).

What is the Holy Spirit up to? Luke wants us to know how Jesus' ministry began upon this earth. It began when the Holy Spirit claimed him in baptism, tested him in the wilderness and filled him with power for the ministry that lies before him.

Why is this important? The stage is set for Jesus to read the words of Isaiah's prophesy about the coming Messiah. What's more, the Holy Spirit will fill Jesus with power for ministry as he reads the text that will become his mission statement as that long-awaited Messiah:

Bring good news to the poor.

Proclaim release to the captives.

Recovery of sight to the blind.

Let the oppressed go free.

Proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

It is a defining moment in the Spirit because the Spirit has anointed Jesus to do these things!

Wow.

Jesus has the Spirit, which has been described as *Dunamis*, the Greek word defined as power, potential, ability.

Jesus also has the mission. Luke emphasizes that mission was to bring good news to the poor with a particular concern for the liberation of the impoverished and oppressed. This underscores that what is needed is social justice.

Baptist minister Robert Parham writes that "Luke 4:1-19 is one of the most ignored, watered down, spiritualized or glossed-over text in many [Baptist] pulpits, evading or emptying Jesus' [first] statement of his moral agenda." He goes on to summarize that in these verses: "Jesus said the gospel was for the poor and oppressed speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized – the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down."¹

All of this was and is very challenging to hear for those who are **not** among the poor, marginalized, oppressed or imprisoned. It is threatening to contemplate the turning upside down of economic structures from which we benefit.

I wonder what it might be like to claim the moral courage to listen to the intention of God for humanity as Jesus proclaims it in today's gospel lesson.

Perhaps we can be opened up by hearing accounts of how persons who are in those very situations hear with joy and renewed hope this good news of social transformation. Two things are required of us to do this kind of listening: compassion and opportunity.

Let's first consider compassion. Human compassion is called for to carry out this mission of social justice. Compassion literally means "to suffer together" or "to suffer with." It's true that we're most at ease with predictability and the status quo in our lives. We don't like to make ourselves vulnerable to suffering. However, when we hear the personal stories of those who are suffering, we are moved to want to come alongside the one who is suffering, and to do what we can to ease their burden, to lighten their load. Sometimes that means just being there, other times it means taking action. Sometimes it means doing both.

On Tuesday night I was able to attend an assembly of the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance (GHIAA) via Zoom. We heard a single mom living in Hartford share the story of her struggle to help her teenage son stay out of trouble, and it truly was a heart wrenching story. She worked hard at her job to meet the physical needs for shelter and food, and to be there for him physically and emotionally. Despite her efforts, her son still got in trouble. Ultimately, a civic organization in Hartford got involved and provided caring and compassionate support. As a result, she and her son both have renewed hope of positive transformation.

¹ (Hest 2009, 287)

Also, on Tuesday night, when I was in a small group breakout session, I heard from members of GHIAA Jewish congregations about their ongoing fear and concern as a result of last Saturday's hate crime/act of terrorism which took place in Congregation Beth Israel in Collyville, Texas. Individuals expressed that while members of the congregation in Texas were being held hostage literally, they feel held hostage by the rampant anti-semitism which continues to rear its ugly head in our society and culture.

Listening with compassion to these stories is so important to our individual and collective understanding of how our neighbors, our friends, our fellow humans, are experiencing marginalization, oppression, imprisonment in its various forms.

I mentioned compassion; now I want to mention opportunity. Our congregation is very fortunate to be part of an organization like GHIAA. The core team here at First Church is inviting everyone to participate in house meetings over the next several weeks. These house meetings provide an opportunity to build relationships with others in our congregation by learning about their stories. These house meetings provide opportunity for compassionate listening about the things which really matter to us; about the things which cause us concern, worry, fear and anger. Sharing our story and listening to the stories of others gathered helps us learn how we can identify those issues in this time and this place in order to bring about social justice where we are.

Two other opportunities which I will lift up include our relationship with Manantial de Gracia who worship here in the Chapel on Sundays at 12:30. It is worthwhile to note that they are open to building a relationship between our two congregations. As the only Spanish-speaking LGBTQ+ congregation in the Southern New England Conference of the UCC, I believe it is an extraordinary opportunity to listen to their stories, and they ours.

Finally, we will soon welcome two new refugee families from Afghanistan. I can only imagine the stories they have to share. This opportunity is surely one which lives out the words of the prophet Isaiah.

In today's passage, we learned what Jesus came to do. Insofar as we measure our lives against this, we are following Jesus' ministry. We are anointed with the power of the Spirit to follow in the way of Jesus!

My most ardent prayer is that in the reading of this Scripture today, that it will be fulfilled in **our** hearing... so we may bring good news, proclaim release, recovery and restoration!

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