

Send Me
Luke 4:16-28
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, August 23, 2009

In today's lesson, Luke tells the story of Jesus preaching his first sermon in his hometown synagogue. Reading this, I remembered preaching my first sermon in my home church.

On a Saturday night the phone rang. It was my pastor's wife telling me her husband caught the flu. Would I preach the sermon tomorrow? Luckily, I just finished writing my first sermon for my preaching class. **"Sure, I'd be glad to help out"**, I replied.

I hung up the phone both excited and terrified. I was about to experience a rite of passage: preaching my first sermon in my home church.

When I woke up Sunday morning, I developed a good case of the jitters. What if my sermon was a flop? Fears like that kept racing through my head as I got to the church and was greeted by the Pastor's wife. **"George wants you to wear his pulpit gown. He's sorry he can't be here to hear you, but he told me to tell you he's praying for you."**

"Thanks, I need all the prayers I can get."

Well, by 12 o'clock it was all over. I can't for the life of me remember what I preached about, but apparently it was a big hit! Men old enough to be my father and grandfather came up and said, **"We're proud of you son."** Ladies old enough to be my mother and grandmother hugged and kissed me on the cheek. It was a celebration! Harry, our young seminarian preached his first sermon! An important milestone in his budding career!

Unlike me, when Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown synagogue he really wasn't concerned whether or not his sermon would succeed or fail, nor was he concerned whether or not his fellow Nazarenes would like him or not. Jesus, the young preacher, didn't preach sermons to gain approval. Instead, he preached sermons proclaiming the Word of the Lord, which contains both Good News and hard news. The Good News: God loves you unconditionally. The hard news: you and I have to change our ways if God's love is ever going to change us.

There are two types of sermons: First, there's the pastoral sermon whose purpose is to be pastoral, giving assurance divine help is on the way. Pastoral sermons usually leave the listener feeling if not good, at least hopeful.

The second type of sermon is the prophetic sermon. Prophetic sermons simply tell it like it is. Prophetic sermons shake you up by uncovering your hidden sins and questioning your hidden agendas.

That's why whenever Amos or Jeremiah stood up in the public square and proclaimed, "**Thus saith the Lord...**" the people braced themselves for a tongue lashing and then complain the prophet was being unreasonable.

But then there's the third type of sermon that's both pastoral and prophetic, a sermon assuring you of God's love, but also challenging you to grow away from your old sinful nature and then, live like Jesus.

Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War worshipped regularly at the New York Presbyterian Church. One day on the ride home from church, his aide asked, "**Mr. President, what did you think of the sermon?**" Lincoln answered, "**I thought it was eloquent, well thought out and powerfully delivered.**" "**Then you liked it?**" "**No, ultimately it failed,**" the President concluded, "**It did not ask of us something great.**"

When Jesus preached his first sermon in his hometown pulpit he asked of his listeners something great, to embrace and put into action the gospel of liberation and salvation spoken by the prophet Isaiah 700 years earlier.

At first, his neighbors were impressed. "**Listen to Joseph's son. I remember him when he was only a boy. My I'm proud of Jesus, as if he were my own son. He was born to preach.**"

That was their first reaction. They were impressed, because so far they heard the pastoral side of Jesus' sermon, but soon he would preach the prophetic portion and their reaction was not so positive.

Jesus began with the lesson:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has chosen me to proclaim
liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind
to set free the oppressed
and announce the time has come
when the Lord will save his people."*

There are two ways you can take this: first, you can see yourself as a victim of injustice and oppression, the one in need of salvation, but then, if you're honest and brave enough you can again listen to Isaiah's words, not as the victim, but as the oppressor, the same one who is either passively or actively oppressing your neighbor. In this case, this is where the challenge to rise to greatness Lincoln spoke about comes in.

I'm sure it was very easy and satisfying for the members of that congregation to listen to the beginning of Jesus' sermon. They were hearing the pastoral comforting side of Jesus.

**"The Lord has chosen me to bring good news
to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim
liberty to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind
to set free the oppressed."**

The people who lived in Nazareth were not rich and powerful. They were poor people with a simple faith. They didn't see themselves as oppressors, instead they were the oppressed. Their country was brutally ruled by the Romans who tried to rob them of their culture and faith. Life for them was hard and it galled them they were not free and independent. For hundreds of years they cried out to God to restore Israel as it was under King David. They waited patiently for Messiah, who would usher in God's kingdom once and for all.

So when Jesus' neighbors heard Jesus' sermon, they expected Jesus to confirm they were the poor and oppressed victims Isaiah spoke of so movingly. They were expecting a pastoral sermon from their young preacher, giving another small dose of hope to keep them going until the Messiah finally showed up to set things right.

But Jesus wanted to lift them above victim hood and challenge them to greatness.

Jesus pointed out God wasn't just their God, but the God of their non-Jewish neighbors as well. To prove his point Jesus documented how God, through Elijah, gave comfort and healing to the Gentiles. What was the point of this? Jesus was being prophetic reminding his neighbors God wasn't their personal property and they had to move beyond being victims to becoming agents of peace and justice not just the recipients. Jesus challenged them to a new level of greatness, to get beyond themselves and act like God's chosen people, chosen not for privilege, but service.

Listen again to the scripture Jesus based his sermon on:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has chosen me to proclaim
liberty to the captives...
to set free the oppressed
and announce the time has come
when the Lord will save his people."*

Here's where Jesus asks something great of you: we are challenged to move beyond victimhood to servanthood, even though you may be a victim.

Isaiah's words become our job description as disciples of Christ. You and I are called to put flesh on the gospel and make Jesus real to those around us, not just by being

kind or nice, but by being active agents of justice and peace whenever you see people suffering because of man's inhumanity to man.

Here's a metaphor for the Church I'd like you to play with for a while. The church is like a MASH unit on a battlefield. Sometimes you come in here on Sunday mornings wounded. So, you come to be healed, renewed and restored. But then you're sent right out again to fight the good fight not just for yourself, but especially for the least of Christ's brothers and sisters.

I have a hard question for you. After you've been healed and reaffirmed are you going back out to fight the good fight for Jesus and his gospel? Are you becoming aware of the needs in your community and working hard to set the captives free?

It's very important for you and me to love and support each other in our faith community, but we also need to challenge each other to make sure our Christian ministry isn't contained in these four walls. There's a great big hurting, broken world out there dying to hear the Gospel of peace and love. What are you and I doing about it?

God empowers us to follow Jesus. God provides opportunities for ministry and God guides you in your ministry. What's more God gives you a job description. Let's say it again one more time.

**"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."**

May I suggest you make this your text for the new week. Put it on your refrigerator, or your mirror. Say it and pray it over and over, and then wait for God to lead you to make Jesus real to your neighbor and your world a better place.

Let us pray!