

SCRIPTURE'S GREATEST HITS

Jesus' Mission Statement

Luke 4:14-21

July 16, 2023

The very first sermon I ever preached was delivered to a congregation that had formed my faith as a child and a teenager. Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, was a second family for me. And so, when I was a freshman in college, the congregation invited me back to deliver a sermon during the time between my father's departure as pastor and the arrival of the new interim minister. It was a good thing that the church members already knew and loved me. The sermon was terrible. In fact, I would wager that it was the worst sermon ever preached from that pulpit. An embarrassment of clichéd illustrations, overused metaphors, and gratuitous theological jargon meant to prove the preacher's intelligence. The sermon tried way too hard, and (I know you will find this hard to believe) it was also far too long. At the doors of the sanctuary, a parade of sweet older women gave me hugs and assured me that God was calling me to do... something. I noted they were deliberately vague on any details.

Despite my lingering self-consciousness about the quality of that sermon from two decades ago, I am glad that I kept a copy. Now, after the 8:15 service, a member asked if they could see that copy. The answer is no. But it is humbling for me to keep on hand. Good for the occasional laugh. But perhaps most importantly, it is a reminder of the danger of over-explanation, of too many words. Inexperienced preachers are often guilty of cramming everything they know about the Bible, theology, and the world in general into a single sermon, and I was certainly an offender that day. The sermon (get this) was titled "Why Religion Matters," (quite a weighty topic for a seventeen year old) and it was

essentially a theoretical argument for the necessity of Christian faith and a diatribe against its detractors in contemporary culture. Religion matters, I said with a wholly unearned confidence, because of its psychological benefits, its contribution to a settled social order, and its discouragement of immorality. You know, *all the reasons you come to church!*

For a refreshing contrast, how about the first sermon of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke? As I mentioned to the children, if you blinked during the scripture reading this morning, you might have missed it. The pace of Luke's gospel in its first four chapters is swift. Jesus appears on the scene a grown man. He is baptized by his eccentric relative John. He is driven by the Spirit of God into the desert of trial and temptation. He returns to Galilee and begins to teach in the synagogue. After baptism, after temptation, Jesus goes home to Nazareth. He returns to his home congregation. And this is where he preaches his first sermon.

The scripture reading that day was from the prophet Isaiah, the sixty-first chapter. It would have been a well-known passage among that congregation — a text that they had heard often before. For it is an image of God's future of abundance and a summary of the prophet's call to preach. Jesus reads that passage out loud in his home church. You can image the scene: parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, Sunday school teachers and children's choir directors beaming with pride. The young man rolls up the scroll, clears his throat, and begins his sermon. Now perhaps they thought he would start with a joke, or maybe a cute story, or at least a few words of gratitude for their role in shaping his faith. But the preacher Jesus, it turns out, has no patience for such

pleasantries. This is no theoretical presentation on the merits of religion; it is a revelation. In my hearing, there is an urgency in his voice.

And here is what he says: "*Today*, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

That's it. That's all. The words of the prophet have come true here and now. End of sermon.

In utter amazement, the family and friends who have come to hear the boy preacher turn to each other in the pews. "The Spirit of the Lord? Here? Now? On him? Isn't that Joseph's kid? The carpenter's apprentice?"

Well, I regret to inform you that by the end of the chapter, their confusion will turn to rage. They will drive Jesus out of his hometown, literally pushing him to the edge of a cliff. Talk about a tough congregation. Those politely deflating comments I received at the door don't seem so bad!

So, what happened? How did things turn so quickly against the homegrown preacher, the pride of Nazareth? Luke here is thin on details, but I think it had something to do with the sermon. Specifically, one word.

Today.

Oh, Jesus, you could have gone a different route.

Perhaps focus on the historical context of Isaiah's call, that return from exile and the joy surrounding it. The return of God's people to their promised land. The golden age of the prophets. Perhaps give a trip down memory lane. A survey of the past.

Or, cast the vision—this ultimate promise of God's coming kingdom in the sweet by and by when all will be restored and right. And God will be on the throne. Give a vision for the future.

Today is contested. *Today* hits closer to home.

I say this with some degree of familiarity. Communities of faith tend to be mildly obsessed with treasured

memories of the past (accurate or not). The past—when the pews were filled every single Sunday, or the stores were closed every single Sunday, or children knew how to sit still in church. Or, we project our hope into a distant future that absolves us from any meaningful action in the present. We say, "God will make it all right one day. Someday."

We're caught between nostalgia that immobilizes us or escapism that absolves us.

There is a temptation to relegate this morning's scripture in the same way. In other words, to do the opposite of what Jesus did with the passage from Isaiah. To confine Jesus' sermon to the past (*Wasn't that Jesus courageous? Wasn't that a powerful sermon he preached?*) or to project it into the future (*What a wonderful vision Jesus gives us of the world that is to come! Someday the kingdom will arrive and life will look like that!*).

But—stay with me here—what if it is meant for *today*? What if we are meant to say, as Jesus did, the spirit of the Lord is upon us *today*? The year of Jubilee is *this year*. What if we are to preach good news to the poor *now*? Release to the captives. Recovery of sight to the blind.

The sermon may have been succinct, but the rest of Luke's gospel tells the whole story. These few words become the mission statement by which Jesus lives his life. In other words, the man practices what he preaches. Not only that, he asks, demands, that others do the same. "If any would follow me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow after me." In fact, just when Jesus begins to attract a crowd, he has a way of speaking hard truths about inconvenient changes and radical reversals. Things like: give away your possessions. Welcome the outcast. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who mourn. None of these blessings, none of these commands, is set in the distant past or a hoped-for future. They are to be lived *now*. His absolute commitment to the words he speaks is unwavering,

and the more passionate his actions become the more uncomfortable his followers feel.

For it turns out that when he read Isaiah's words, he really meant them. Not as self-righteous platitudes, or theological jargon, cliches, or easy truths. His sermon and his life are inseparable. The themes are the same. It starts with one word: *today*.

Today. It's the most challenging word in the sermon because it will not let us get by with warm feelings about what was or hopes about what could be. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us. *Today*.

If we really believe it, then we'll start right now. If the Spirit of the Lord is with us, then our lives—and our life—must bear witness to its presence and power. And so, let me say that the time has come for the Church of Jesus Christ to put aside divisive platitudes or smug self-righteousness and really live what we proclaim and profess, to choose the way of depth in place of simplistic messages aiming only for ease or abstract statements about a distant God's fleeting hopes for us. I believe that if we take the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus' mission statement, seriously, we will recapture the audacity of faith and its claim on our life. That is, we will be different because we follow Jesus. We will deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow because it matters. Think of baby Weldon and Jane. What faith will they wait to hear? Not that following Jesus is easy, but that it is important. That something is at stake here.

For if the Spirit of the Lord is upon us *now*, we will not be silent when voices claiming the authority of Christian leadership preach racial superiority, or stoke the fires of fear, or incite acts of violence.

If the Spirit of the Lord is upon us *now*, we will not hoard what we have when our neighbors don't have enough.

If the Spirit of the Lord is upon us *now*, we will look and listen with ears and eyes and hearts for the conditions in our community that most need our faithful response. And we will *do something* about them. We will see children whose promise for the future is comprised by a lack of investment early in their life. And we will do something about it. We will hear the voices of those who are squeezed by rising costs and stagnant wages. And we will do something about it. We will bear witness to the lives of those held captive by a constant fear of violence. And we will do something about it.

When Jesus stood and read those words from Isaiah, when he proclaimed *this is happening today*, it was no sanctimonious reflection meant to please the hometown crowd. No, this sermon—it set the world on notice that something significant is happening here. Now. That the faithful are being called out of their sanctuaries of safety and into a world desperate for hope. That God really is doing a new thing when God's people choose to act as if God's Spirit is present.

And so, though I pray that I have grown as a preacher and a disciple in the years since I delivered that first sermon, my central conviction has not changed at all. I believe, even more fiercely than before, that our faith matters.

Here's why: because I believe the Spirit of the Lord *is* with us. *Today. Today*. It's the riskiest word in the sermon. A charge. So, let's get started. Amen.