

## Good News

**Scripture:** Luke 4:14-30; Isaiah 61:1-11

Every year during Advent we read about Zechariah, Elizabeth, and the birth of John. We read about the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she will give birth to Jesus. We read about Mary's visit to Elizabeth which includes Mary's song of resistance, deliverance, and praise. And then on Christmas Eve we always hear the story of Jesus' birth, the angel's announcement to the shepherds, and the shepherds' visit to see this new baby and his parents.

We always spend a lot of time in the Gospel According to Luke during Advent because the other three gospels don't include all of these stories. Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus, relates Joseph's dilemma after an angel tells him Mary is pregnant, and sums up Jesus' birth in one verse. Mark skips over the birth altogether beginning with the proclamation of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. John is more metaphorical, talking about the Word becoming flesh rather than about the birth of a baby.

On the first Sunday of the new year we usually read the story of the Wise Men which is found only in the book of Matthew. Then, if we're following the lectionary readings, we hear about the baptism of Jesus on the Sunday after that. The details of this event vary a bit, but all four of the gospel writers include it in their accounts.

Last week we read it from Luke along with his version of the temptation of Jesus. You may have noticed all the storytelling has been from Luke since the beginning of December. This will continue to be the case through the end of next month. For most of the next few weeks, our sermons will expand on what we hear in the storytelling.

Since we'll be spending so much time in Luke, let's talk about the context of this book. (You'll notice I'm following my own advice from last week about how to read the Bible.) The stories and sayings of Jesus are found in the Gospels, the first four books of the New Testament. The Gospels were written not simply to record the story of Jesus but to tell the story of Jesus for a particular group of people. Each Gospel writer had to choose which events to include. That process of deciding what information to include and where to include it in the story related to their objective in writing the Gospel, which in turn had something to do with the needs and perspectives of their intended audience.

Luke tells his readers that he wrote his Gospel to give Theophilus the true and complete story of Jesus' life, an orderly account.<sup>1</sup> The name *Theophilus* is a combination of the Greek noun *theos*, translated "God," and the verb *phileo*, meaning "to love" or "cherish." Perhaps Luke and its sequel, the book of Acts, were written for a historical person or perhaps they were written symbolically to readers who consider themselves as those who love God.

The account of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth is unique to Luke's Gospel.<sup>2</sup> It's the first thing Luke tells his readers about Jesus' public ministry. It introduces several major themes

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Parts of the sermon are adapted from Week 1 of "Seeking Justice Together" from *Current*, [Current - Menno Media](#); from Week 8 of "Meet Jesus, the Messiah" from Shine, [Shine - Menno Media](#); and Fred B. Craddock, John

that are repeated in the rest of the Gospel. One of Luke's purposes in writing was to show that Jesus loved all kinds of people. In the parables especially, he wrote about the poor and oppressed. The theme of joy is felt throughout the book, as Christ's coming brought joy and the hope of salvation.

According to Luke, Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth in Galilee. They traveled south to Bethlehem in Judea where Jesus was born. Eight days later they presented their baby in the temple in Jerusalem. According to Matthew, they remained in Bethlehem for awhile before fleeing to Egypt to escape Herod's massacre of the infants. When it was safe, they returned to Nazareth. Other than a trip to Jerusalem when Jesus was 12, none of the writers tell us any more about Jesus until he is 30 years old.

Luke's account of Jesus' return to his hometown begins with an introductory summary.

*Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*

*Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read.<sup>3</sup>*

Luke repeatedly emphasizes that Jesus' ministry is in the power of God's Spirit, both in his movement and in his activity. Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism by John in the Jordan River, possibly just north of the Dead Sea. Then he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness somewhere west of the Dead Sea to be tested. His public ministry begins under the power of the same Spirit. Now Jesus is back in Nazareth where, as an observant Jew, he would have attended synagogue regularly. It was common practice for adult males to read scripture and offer words of interpretation. On this particular occasion, Jesus is the one chosen to read.

Let's return to Luke's account of what happens next.

*The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:*

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me.  
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release to the prisoners  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to liberate the oppressed,  
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

*He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."*

*Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?"<sup>4</sup>*

The words Jesus reads come from the prophet Isaiah. These would have been familiar words to those in the synagogue, words of comfort and hope.

In Isaiah 61, the writer proclaims that the Lord God is always present, even in suffering. God's anointed one is sent to the oppressed, to the ones whose hearts are crushed, to the captives, the imprisoned and to all who mourn. It's not stated here, but in order to reach those persons,

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H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year: Year C*, Trinity Press International, 1994, pp. 87-88, 92-93.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 4:14-16, *Common English Bible*

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:17-22, *Common English Bible*

God's anointed one must also confront the perpetrators and sources of oppression, marginalization, hopelessness and despair. In addition, the mandate from God is to reverse their circumstances and transform their identity and activity.

God instructs the anointed one to pay particular attention to those who grieve over Zion, the sorrowing people in Jerusalem. It's likely that Isaiah 61 was written after Israel's exile in Babylon. They had returned to their homeland with permission to rebuild their city and their temple.

The sorrowing in Jerusalem rises out of frustration and humiliation over their failures – the failure to rebuild the city and the temple to match its former glory, the failure to reconcile the economic disparities and the religious and political disputes within the city. The reality of life in Jerusalem was nothing like their ideal – their expectations for a restored Jerusalem and a harmonious, righteous community.

The comfort God instructs the anointed one to provide will change the way the people see themselves, the way they are regarded by others and the ways they act. They are to be wrapped in victory, joy, and praise instead of depression and sadness. They will no longer be humiliated, fragmented, and dispirited. Then they will accomplish what is needed and what has been too difficult: rebuilding Jerusalem as a city where righteousness and justice flourish.

Just as Isaiah's announcement gave hope to the Babylonian exiles, these same words would have reminded Jesus' contemporaries, oppressed by Rome and harsh economic conditions, of God's promises for future salvation. With these words, Jesus provides concrete content of the good news of the kingdom of God.

Luke places Jesus' ministry within the traditions of his people and their Jewish faith. Here Jesus affirms the sabbath, the Scriptures, and the synagogue. He is, according to Luke, a reformer, not an opponent of his heritage.

In his reading from Isaiah, Jesus announces fulfillment of prophecy and defines what it means to be the Messiah, the Christ. The Messiah is God's servant who will turn the hopes of the poor, the imprisoned, and oppressed into reality.

Jesus goes further, however, implying that he is the one who will inaugurate the kingdom. He announces that these promises have been fulfilled in the hearing of his listeners; that God's reign of salvation and justice is beginning "today." The crowd is amazed. They can hardly believe that such remarkable words can come from the lips of a hometown boy.

But Jesus doesn't accept their admiration and stop there. As he continues talking, the mood in the room shifts. Let's read the rest of the story from Luke 4.

*Then Jesus said to them, "Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum.'" He said, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown. And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it didn't rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed."*

*When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup> Luke 4:23-30, *Common English Bible*

Jesus sees through their admiration and reveals the “inner thoughts of many,” as Simeon predicted at his presentation in the temple as an infant.<sup>6</sup> He quotes two proverbs that suggest the crowd will expect him to show them some mighty deeds. Instead of catering to their demands, he reminds them of two Old Testament stories in which God extended mercy not to insiders but to outsiders.

Many widows in Israel were suffering under the prolonged drought. Elijah brought relief to one, an outsider, a foreigner, the widow at Zarephath in Sidon.<sup>7</sup> With many lepers suffering in Israel, Elisha healed only one, an outsider, a foreigner, Naaman, the Syrian army commander.<sup>8</sup>

These two stories were, of course, in their own Scriptures and quite familiar to Jesus’ listeners. The hometown folk who were praising Jesus and expecting a demonstration of his extraordinary work being reported from Capernaum now resent the fact that Jesus is taking God’s favor to others beyond Nazareth, especially to Capernaum, a town very likely having a heavy non-Jewish population.

Jesus’ message is clear. God’s grace extends beyond Israel—it will not be constrained by finite human expectations. Such words jerk his listeners out of their complacency and self-centeredness and infuriate them. Jesus’ gracious words are indeed good news for some, but they also create conflict and will eventually lead to his suffering and death, as the conclusion of this scene previews.

In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus boldly proclaims that he has been sent by God to bring good news. The good news that he embodies is shalom – healing, freedom, and justice, not only for the people of Israel, but for all people. At first, Jesus’ words are welcome. However, when he begins to flesh them out using the stories of foreigners, the good news sours quickly. The crowd realizes that the healing and freedom Jesus proclaims may not be for them, or at least not only for them. God’s good news also contains difficult truth.

The bad news as we read the words from Isaiah and Luke is that God’s vision is still a work in progress. While we catch glimpses of restoration and harmony where justice and righteousness flourish, we continue to see much brokenness, discord, injustice, and wrongdoing in our community and world. The disturbing news as we read Jesus’ inaugural sermon is that while we easily identify with the powerless, the hungry, and the poor, we realize that compared to many people we are the powerful, the satisfied, and the rich. We participate in all the “isms” we condemn – consumerism, racism, sexism, absolutism, extremism, point-the-fingerism.....the list could go on and on. We are a little too comfortable to consider how our way of life may negatively affect those around us.

The good news is that God always provides a way to hit the restart button. Jesus’ greatest goal was to show us the way of our Creator, to give us a glimpse of the kingdom of God, and then empower us to live out that good news. Jesus’ mission was to usher in shalom.

As we hope and pray for God’s reign of justice, freedom, and healing, may God give us the strength and grace to be part of making real God’s kingdom on earth. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:35

<sup>7</sup> 1 Kings 17:7-24

<sup>8</sup> 2 Kings 5