

“THE SHORTEST SERMON” or “MISSION STATEMENT”

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Luke 4:14-21

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is possibly the shortest sermon on record! Jesus had read the scripture from Isaiah 61 (1-2) and 58 (6), and then sat down, which signaled he would then interpret the reading – and he did so in one sentence that has been passed down for 2000 years.

Most interpretation in the synagogue consisted of rote rehearsal of commentaries handed down from the elders. But Jesus does a new thing – and with authority! And he begins with the word "Today."

- *Today* the Spirit of the Lord is upon me.
- *Today* I bring good news to the poor.
- *Today* I proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind.
- *Today* I let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The people of Israel have waited for centuries for the fulfillment of promises that God made throughout their history, beginning with Abraham. Now Jesus declares that the wait is over — that the day has come — that the promises are fulfilled — that salvation is near! This is indeed good news!

More than that, it sets the tone for the entirety of the Gospel According to Luke and its partner book, The Acts of the Apostles. It's Jesus' first act of ministry in this Gospel. Last week we read of the Marriage at Cana, the first act in John. In Mark, his first act is an exorcism; in Matthew, it is the Sermon on the Mount; **in Luke, it is a sermon in the synagogue.** And since it sets the tone for what is to follow, you could say it serves as Jesus' "Mission Statement" in Luke's eyes.

This is also one of the richest passages I can think of. Let's take a look, verse-by-verse — you may wish to follow along in your Bibles.

First of all, we're told that Jesus returned to Galilee after his temptations, filled with the power of the Spirit. Luke emphasizes repeatedly that Jesus is empowered by the Spirit. (1:35; 3:22; 4:1) That's a lesson we all need to be reminded of. It's easy to think we are equipped by the Church and then we set off on our own, but aside from the Holy Spirit, we risk either heading down a blind alley or finding ourselves without support. The Spirit is essential to all that we do as Church – from worship and prayer to congregational meetings and finance reports. The Spirit empowers us in ministry, just as it empowered Jesus.

Verse 15 and the end of Verse 14 describe Jesus' reputation and burgeoning following. So far, he's the hometown boy who "made good." This will, of course, change. But for now, Luke wants us to know that Jesus has made a bit of a splash.

And his teaching is in the synagogues. The center of Jewish worship historically was the temple in Jerusalem. However, during the Babylonian Exile and the Diaspora (the geographical scattering of the Jews), Jews established local synagogues so that they might worship regularly. Synagogues will strongly influence Christian worship – perhaps especially Protestant worship. Temple worship in Jerusalem focused on ritual and sacrifice; synagogue worship involved prayers, scripture readings, and teaching.

For most Jews, temple worship is something that they experience, at best, a few times a year. But with synagogues in each community, Jewish worship "moved more and more from the realm of [rites and rituals] and of outward acts toward the cultivation of the mind and heart and moral conscience"¹

And here, in verse 16, is our plug for Christian Education! Jesus goes to the synagogue on the Sabbath “as was his custom.” During the Christmas and Epiphany seasons, we’ve read that Mary and Joseph submitted to the Jewish practices of circumcision and presentation in the temple. Luke has established that Mary and Joseph were observant of Jewish religious traditions. What a wonderful model for church parenthood! Their faithfulness in raising Jesus within his faith tradition helped to shape the person that he was.

And in the previous passage, Luke tells us that when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, he responded with “It is written!” He had learned the scriptures well and they became his sword and shield in the wilderness temptations. There is an important lesson here. All of us have wilderness experiences, whether temptation, grief, or some other adversity. Wilderness experiences seldom telegraph their coming — we cannot expect a week to prepare.

It has always caught my attention that Jews in concentration camps in World War II recited scripture and ritual to keep their hope alive. And we’ve seen in the media, that the folk of Haiti have prayed and sung spiritual songs during their long waits for help from the outside world. Our worship is not only for a passing moment of reflection and, hopefully, awe and wonder. It is also preparation, through the learning of scripture and hymns, for those moments in the wilderness.

On to verses 16-17, which constitute our oldest detailed account of synagogue worship! "He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him". The language would be Aramaic, the language of ordinary Jewish people during Jesus' lifetime. A portion of the Torah would be read in Hebrew, and an explanation would be given in Aramaic, followed by a reading from the Prophets with explanation — the part Jesus is quoted as doing. Other elements of worship would include the recitation of the Shema – “Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God is One”, the Eighteen Benedictions, a psalm, and a benediction.²

Moving on to verse 18, we read that Jesus is anointed by the Spirit. The words "Messiah" (from the Hebrew) and "Christ" (from the Greek) both mean "anointed" or "the anointed one." Anointing with oil was used for various purposes — for healing, for burial, and for expressing grief or joy. But most especially, it was used to designate a person for a significant role. In the Old Testament, prophets were anointed; priests were anointed; and kings were anointed. Thus, when the New Testament speaks of Jesus as anointed, it points to his having been set apart for his unique role as prophet, priest, and king.

Jesus was anointed, not just as a prophet to bring good news, but was also anointed as Messiah to act — "to let the oppressed go free". **Jesus is the bringer, not just the herald, of salvation.**

Continuing in v. 18, and elsewhere in scripture, when Jesus speaks of “the poor,” he is talking about something more than economic poverty. In his ministry, he will show special concern for outsiders, people of low status, vulnerable people — whether their problems stem from economic poverty or other causes. We are reminded that Jesus considered these “outsiders” worthy of divine grace, and that we should too.

Similarly, in speaking of captives, the Greek word implies a freedom that includes forgiveness . . . the freedom to move ahead, and freedom from guilt. And in referring to the blind, we learn later in the Gospel that, to Jesus, blindness may include the pride that can blind us to the outsiders, the marginalized, the “untouchables.”

And the last of the list, “to let the oppressed go free”, may be illustrated by a quote from Archbishop Desmond Tutu. “There's nothing ever to equal being free. You can't put a money value to being free, to be able to wake up in a country and not have to say, 'Do I have my pass on me?' 'Am I allowed to go there?' 'Can I take my children to that school?’” He tells of walking past a playground with his daughter and having to stop her from playing on the swings. She would protest, “But there are other children there.” He says, “You got quite sick having to say, 'Yes, there are other children there, but they are not quite children like you.’”³

But verse 19 is my favorite . . . “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Jesus is not emphasizing the Day of Judgement, and he is expanding upon the Jewish holiday’s “Day” of Atonement. This is an extended year of the Lord’s favor. Isaiah wrote these words to encourage the Jewish people in exile. Luke uses them to proclaim the reign of Jesus and the Good News of Salvation through him.

The phrase is also closely linked to the “Year of Jubilee” – the sabbath of sabbaths. Every sabbath year (every 7th year), Jewish people are commanded to let their land lie fallow, to forgive debts, and to free slaves.. The Jubilee Year is a sabbath of sabbaths . . . seven times seven, or every 50th year. In the Jubilee Year, the Torah requires Jewish people to return ancestral lands to their historic owners. With this requirement, God showed his concern for people at the lower end of the economic spectrum. These provisions are designed to reduce the disadvantage of the poor — to insure that the wealthy cannot accumulate all the land and consolidate all of the power.

Many Christian denominations, but especially the Roman Catholics, have banded together to proclaim Jubilee regarding the debtor nations of the world. What might that look like in the United States alone — where those receiving **7-figure** bonuses would be required to share with the average citizen? It’s a radical concept, and not one that we see carried out even among the faithful.

Finally, in verse 20, *“he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

Can you imagine how that must have been heard? It was undoubtedly as captivating as the reading of the Torah in today’s Old Testament lesson.

Let us not forget the radical good news of scripture. Let us not fail to be awed by the grace of God, coming in Jesus, to minister to each one of us. Let us not forget the Spirit that enlivens, empowers, and accompanies us in mission.

And let us continue our ministries in ways that support this, the “Mission Statement of Jesus” in our own congregation’s mission. These scriptures are fulfilled in our own time when Presbyterian Disaster Assistance and Church World Service, among others, minister to the poorest of the poor in Haiti. But they are also fulfilled when we share the Bread of Life in our food ministries locally.

Blessings be upon our work, and may it multiply, in the name of Jesus Christ.

ENDNOTES

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1. Gilmour, S. MacLean & Bowie, Walter Russell, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 8. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), 89, as quoted by Dick Donovan in *SermonWriter*.
 2. Again, Donovan is quoting from Evans, Craig A., *New International Biblical Commentary: Luke* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1990), 73; Bock, Darrell L., *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series: Luke*, Vol. 3 (Downers Grove, Illinois, Intervarsity Press, 1994), 88; and Stein, Robert H., *The New American Commentary: Luke* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 155.
 3. Tunku Varadarajan, "The Archbishop," *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 30-31, 2006.