

General Hospital  
Sermon on Luke 4:14-21 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, January 21, 2007

There are two main types of hospitals: general and specialized. Specialized hospitals may treat one particular condition, e.g., psychiatric hospitals address mental illness, or they may treat one select group, such as at children's hospitals. General hospitals, by contrast, provide a broad array of services and treatments to individuals with widely varying needs. Within a general hospital are different specialized departments such as the emergency room, the operating room, radiology, oncology, pediatrics, obstetrics, etc. The advantage of a general hospital is that it can address a wide range of medical issues and conditions within one institution.

Jesus is like a general hospital in the sense that within himself he provides for the people he serves in a variety of ways. We have lots of titles by which we refer to Jesus: Savior, Lord, Master, Redeemer. We call Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the True Vine, the Great Physician. All of these titles point to the many roles Jesus performed throughout his life and ministry, and all of them seek to answer the question, "Who is Jesus?"

That is the question Luke seeks to answer at the outset of Jesus' public ministry. Up until this point in his Gospel, Luke has told us, his hearers, quite plainly who Jesus is. Angels announced that he is "the Son of the Most High," the savior of his people. John the Baptist pointed to him as the Mighty One who would baptize with Spirit and fire. At his baptism the voice of God declared him to be the beloved Son of God, well-pleasing in God's sight. But all of this has happened out of the spotlight, away from major media outlets and large TV markets. The young Jesus had only just returned from being tempted and tested by Satan in the wilderness when he began his ministry of preaching, teaching, and healing in the Jewish towns of Galilee. Luke tells us Jesus "began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone" (4:15).

We know of Jesus' preaching and teaching only by way of reports that were being spread about him through all the surrounding country (4:14). The first thing all young preachers—and perhaps especially those who are sent to small, rural churches—have to get used to is the idea that everyone talks about them, evaluating their preaching skills and how friendly they are and whether or not they have come out to visit. Needless to say, the buzz about Jesus was all very positive indeed: he was a great preacher, very friendly, and always came over to visit, generally politely accepting a second helping of pecan pie or another glass of tea, thanks very much.

So when Jesus was invited to preach on Homecoming Day at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, the excitement was at a fever pitch. Everyone had heard so many good things about him and they started showing up early to get a good seat. I imagine the pews filled so quickly that the minister had to instruct the ushers to set up some folding chairs, (and I can only dream of such happening in this chapel). The congregation sang a psalm from the Psalter, the hymnbook of Judaism, and then they recited the *Shema*, Judaism's version of a creed. There were scripture readings: one from the *Torah*, or Law, and one from the *Haptarah*, or Prophets, which might well have been chosen by a lectionary. Then there was an offering—of course there was an offering. And then there was the sermon. The service ended with the benediction. It is no coincidence that our worship service looks and feels a lot like the synagogue worship service.

The scripture text that Jesus chose was Isaiah 61:1-2, a good choice for a reading, given that it was both a familiar text and a popular one: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus read, "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" (4:18-19). "Oh, he reads so well," gushed one worshiper. "I just can't wait to hear what he has to say." What Jesus had to say next surprised everyone.

If he had come from a high-church tradition, Jesus should have said, “This is the word of God for the people of God,” and the people would have responded, “Thanks be to God.” Had he come from a low-church tradition, at least he could have said, “Here ends the reading. May God add his blessing to its hearing and interpretation.” Instead, Jesus said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

For a moment there was a kind of stunned silence. Everybody in that synagogue knew that passage from Isaiah just like everybody in this chapel knows John 3:16 (or at least John 11:35, “Jesus wept”). And everybody loved that passage dearly because of the good things that it promised, namely “the coming abundance and prosperity of Jerusalem”<sup>1</sup>—a time when debts would be cancelled, and slaves freed, and property restored. Isaiah told the people of Israel that God’s spirit had anointed him, called him and set him apart, to do God’s transforming work. The work the prophet had been anointed to was the work of “powerful ministries to the weak, the powerless, and the marginalized to restore them to full function” in their community.<sup>2</sup>

The only problem was history. So many years had intervened since the prophet Isaiah spoke those words to Israel. So much history had happened in the interval. And to paraphrase one of the students in the movie, “The History Boys,” “History is just one flippin’ thing after another.” The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. The only things to count on in life are death and taxes. You play by the rules and try to do right, and still wind up with the short end of the stick. You lose your job. You lose your health. You lose a loved one. You lose hope. You are desperate for a way up, a way out. You may try church or you may try yoga or you may try drugs and alcohol or you may try destructive relationships. Anything to free yourself from the pain and the hopelessness. So much history, so much pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40-66*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998) 212.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

There in that packed little synagogue in his own hometown, Jesus of Nazareth announced that from then on, history was going to be different: Your history and mine. The history of the world. History would be different because that day, today, God's promises to his people were being fulfilled in their hearing. What Isaiah had announced, Jesus is now seen doing himself.

Jesus comes to Nazareth and to us to proclaim good news to the poor. And lest we think that this good news is not for us, Luke Timothy Johnson tells us that “[T]he poor’ represent not only the economically impoverished but all who are marginal or excluded from human fellowship, the outcast.”<sup>3</sup> “The poor” are those who for reasons of “education, gender, family heritage, religious purity, vocation, economics, and so on” are excluded from human society. If ever you feel that you don’t belong, that you aren’t part of the ‘in’ group, Jesus’ good news is for you. Jesus comes as friend and brother.

Jesus comes to Nazareth and to us to bring release to the captives. The word ‘release’ has strong associations with debt, and this is a word of comfort for all who find themselves concerned by mounting bills and growing debt. But ‘release’ can also refer to “liberation from a captivity of various kinds”<sup>4</sup>: captivity to fear, to loneliness, to despair. Jesus comes to open the prison door for all who are bound by forces beyond their control and releases them into the sunlight of God’s new day. Jesus comes as redeemer.

Jesus comes to recover sight to the blind. The Gospels are full of stories in which Jesus brings physical healing: restoring sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speaking to the mute, walking to the lame, wholeness to the leper, movement to the paralyzed. This work of healing is also the work of salvation, for “to heal” in Greek also means “to save”: to make whole, to restore to well-being, to make right again. Our Savior is also the Great Physician.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina vol. 3 (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press) 79.

<sup>4</sup> C. F. Evans, *Saint Luke*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London: SCM Press, Philadelphia: Trinity Press International) 270.

Jesus comes to Nazareth and to us to let the oppressed go free. Literally, this phrase reads, “to send away in freedom those who have been broken in pieces.” And life has a way of doing that, for we live in a world of broken promises, broken relationships, broken hearts, and broken dreams. We are a broken people, broken by our own sinfulness and wrongdoing, our turning away from the God who would guide our steps. The release from oppression that Jesus brings is deliverance from the oppressive power of sin. Jesus comes as deliverer.

Finally, Jesus comes to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. Now is the time, says Jesus, the day of salvation. Today the promises of God are fulfilled in your hearing: God’s promise to bring and make real the good news of deliverance, release, freedom, forgiveness, healing, and wholeness. All of this is the work of God, brought together and made real in Jesus of Nazareth, prophet and preacher, savior and shepherd, physician and friend. It is to him that we can turn to heal and save us, to forgive us and set us free. This is the work for which the Spirit of God anointed him, and the good news for us.