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Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
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Luke 4:14-21

“Jesus’ Inaugural Address”

In this week’s Gospel reading, we are treated to Jesus’ first act in his public ministry. That’s right, 4 chapters into the book and Jesus finally gets to do what he came to do.

In a sense, this scene is Jesus’ inaugural address. Now, since we recently heard President Obama’s inaugural address, either live or from snippets on the news, we know that inaugural addresses are important. They lay out the President’s vision for the country. One hundred fifty years ago, President Lincoln used his second inaugural address to do something no president had ever done before – to speak in critical terms of the nation – in order to name the evil of slavery, the toll it had taken on the country, and the need to stay the course and resolve both the war and its cause.

President Obama used his inaugural address to announce the priorities of his second term. Priorities that either get you excited, or . . .not so much. Governor Chris Christie said it took the tone of “my way or the highway”, but added, “The speech is just one speech one day.”

But of course, an inaugural address is more than just a one day speech or a litany of priorities, it’s also a vision. For a president it’s his vision for the country. For Jesus it’s his vision for ministry.

So what kind of vision do we hear in Jesus’ address? We hear a vision that emphasizes bringing good news to the poor. We hear a vision which says that impoverished and oppressed people are of the utmost importance to Jesus. We hear Jesus say the gospel is *for* the poor and oppressed and he’s going to liberate them from structures that keep them that way. And he says he’s going to turn the economic structures upside down.

In today’s story, Jesus has gone back to his hometown to preach, which is always a little awkward. It’s hard to preach to people who taught you in Sunday School and witnessed your teenage years. I know this, because I’ve done it. Imagine any of the children here coming back in 20 years to preach to you. You’ve witnessed their baptisms, watched them in Christmas pageants, seen them through their teenage years, and watched them run through the sanctuary. It would be hard to take them seriously.

The folks in Jesus’ congregation are in that situation. They know all about Jesus. They’ve known him since he was “yea big”. “Joseph’s boy”, they call him-which is affectionate and endearing, but the phrase clues us in to the fact that they don’t have the full picture of who is preaching to them. Yet like any good church family, they’re excited to hear one of their own, and they’re proud of him. They’ve also heard rumors that he’s a good teacher and preacher and gets lots of praise from people who hear him.

Finally, they think, something good will come from Nazareth and we'll get to prove all those naysayers wrong.

You see, Nazareth had a reputation for being a real backwater town. Nothing good came from Nazareth; at least that's what people assumed . . . it's what Phillip himself said in the Gospel of John. Also, the Nazarenes were poor people, mostly farmers. They were subject to Rome's oppressive tax structure, which was taxation without representation, which meant they carried heavy debt that cost them their farmlands. And because they were so poor, their life expectancy was only about 30 years old, which compared to the Romans, which was around 60 years of age, wasn't much.

So when the people sat down to listen to Jesus' sermon, they were excited *and* hoping to hear more than just the reading of some really old words on a scroll. They hoped Jesus' message would have some relevance for them. They wanted to find their own story in Isaiah's story, which is the book Jesus was reading from and preaching on in Luke's Gospel. They wanted to hear something that had meaning for them.

And in that way, they aren't any different than us. We want to find meaning in the Bible and its stories, too.

It's not at all unusual for people to turn to the Bible to find "meaning", and not just any meaning but the meaning; the meaning of life, the meaning of it all, the meaning of the world, in the hope that somehow the Bible will contain the answer to one's or the world's problems. But there is no one answer or right answer in the Bible. The Bible is not a solution book where we can pick and choose our answers to problems. The Bible is a theology book where we look for major themes as to how God works and what God desires for all of creation.

And today we hear Jesus lay out for us what God desires:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus reads. "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."

The oppressed go free, the Nazarenes thought? The captives are released? Those words would have been sweeter than honey to the Nazarenes. God is speaking to me, and it is good news indeed, they thought.

And to top it all off, Jesus tells them that this is the year of the Lord's favor-the jubilee year. That would have been icing on the cake. The Jubilee year was a Jewish tradition celebrated every 50 years, and it meant that all debts were forgiven, all slaves were freed, and all foreclosed land returned to its original owners. Halleluiah praise the Lord! Can you imagine how thrilled they must have been? All spoke well of him, and they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They heard his vision, and they liked it.

I listened this past week to the sermon given at the Inaugural Prayer Service at the National Cathedral the day after the inauguration. Rev. Adam Hamilton, a United Methodist minister from Kansas City, gave the sermon. It's good; you should listen to it.

In that sermon he talks about vision, and cites the work of John Kotter, retired professor from the Harvard Business School, who "noted that two of a leader's most important tasks are to offer a compelling vision, and to motivate and inspire people to pursue the vision. That vision is a clear and compelling picture of where we want to go – our preferred picture of the future." (*Rev. Adam Hamilton, "Compassion, Vision and Perseverance: Lessons from Moses", January 22, 2013, Inaugural Prayer Service*)

Jesus' words today are his vision for ministry and set the stage for the entire gospel of Luke. He presents his, and therefore God's, preferred picture of the future. Indeed, his words are a plumb line that we can use to measure how faithful we are in following him. These words are the benchmark by which we can judge the "success" of our ministry and churches. But sadly, so many churches judge success by other benchmarks.

It is quite popular these days to lift up the importance of knowing and clarifying one's purpose, one's vision, and consciously working toward fulfilling that vision. There are best selling books of advice on this subject, including Kotter's.

One of the biggest sellers is "The Purpose Driven Life" by Rick Warren, who I think you all have heard of, pastor of one of the biggest and most influential megachurches; he gave the invocation at the President's first inauguration.

Citations from scripture fill the book, dozens in every chapter, which makes it even more surprising and troubling that Luke 4 is never quoted. Hmm, I wonder why?

Going back to Kotter, he suggested that the average American company struggled with the lack of a compelling vision for the future. The same is true, of course, for many churches in America – congregations often don't know why they exist, nor do they have a compelling picture of the future that unifies them. This leaves them anemic, and often desperate to find the quick fix and magic pill that will cure it. I know, because I've worked with enough of them on behalf of the presbytery. (*Rev. Adam Hamilton, "Compassion, Vision and Perseverance: Lessons from Moses", January 22, 2013, Inaugural Prayer Service*)

But here's the thing. For me, it's a given that a Christian's understanding of his or her purpose, and the church's understanding of its purpose and mission, should be informed by Jesus' understanding of his mission and purpose. And to understand Jesus' mission and purpose, all you need to do is read Luke 4.

You know, so many people today want to know, "How can we get people into the church?" And I think the answer to that is, "To get people in, you need to go outside."

Tom Harvey, a Presbyterian missionary in Singapore, preached these words: “Mission catches you up in the life and vitality of God, for it is God who relentlessly draws men and women to himself in love and compassion. Moreover, when we step away from mission, there is a corresponding depletion in the life and vitality of the church.”

I think that is so true.

But, and this is an important *but* . . .

This isn't just mission for mission's sake or social justice for social justice's sake, this is mission and social justice born from the work of the Holy Spirit, that gives us the courage and stamina and power to do something for God and God's people. The Holy Spirit, and prayer, are constant companions of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. They are the foundation that undergirds everything he does. That spiritual foundation is so important, and so easy to forget for all of us doers, but without it we can get burned out and feel like we're all alone in this work.

Saying this reminds me of a story Rev. Hamilton told in his sermon about Martin Luther King. It was late January 1957, and Dr. King had received another threatening phone call. It was not his first call like this since the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But on this night, as his children and wife lay sleeping, he said he finally felt like he could not go on. He began to think of a way to gracefully bow out of leadership of the Movement. At midnight he bowed over the kitchen table and began to pray,

I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I can't face it alone.

King described what happened next, “I experienced the presence of the Divine as I had never experienced God before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying: Stand up for righteousness, stand up for truth; and God will be at your side forever” (as quoted by *Rev. Adam Hamilton, “Compassion, Vision and Perseverance: Lessons from Moses”, January 22, 2013, Inaugural Prayer Service*; King, Martin Luther Jr., *Stride Toward FREEDOM: The Montgomery Story*. San Francisco, California: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., chapter 8).

Imagine how the world would be different had he not turned to God in prayer that night.

Let us not forget how important the Spirit is to our work for, just as our Brief Statement of Faith says, “the Spirit gives us courage . . . to unmask idolatries in Church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.” (Brief Statement of Faith, PC(USA))

I'd like to close with a story that, again, I heard in the inaugural prayer service sermon. (Heck, by the time I'm through you might not need to listen to it because I will have quoted so much of it!)

A few years ago, NPR interviewed Rev. Billy Kyles. Kyles was with Dr. King on the balcony of the Loraine Motel when he died. The interviewer asked the Reverend what he'd be preaching that weekend, and Billy told a story you've undoubtedly heard before, but one that bears repeating. He said, "I'll be telling the old story told about Robert Louis Stevenson. Stevenson, the nineteenth-century author, once told how as a boy he'd been sitting in the window, nose pressed against the glass in rapt attention as the lamplighter came to light the gas street lamps. Climbing up and down the ladder in the darkness, he would light one street lamp after another. It was a fascinating sight to a little boy. His father walked in the room, and seeing how intently his son was looking out the window asked, "Son, what are you looking at?" To which the young Stevenson replied, "Father, I'm watching the man out there knock holes in the darkness". (as quoted by *Rev. Adam Hamilton, "Compassion, Vision and Perseverance: Lessons from Moses", January 22, 2013, Inaugural Prayer Service*)

There's a lot of darkness in the world. The darkness of poverty and oppression, blindness and captivity runs rampant. We are called to be knockers of holes in the darkness, bearers of Christ's light. We are called to proclaim good news to the poor, and release to the captives. We are called to recover sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.

That is our calling.

The vision is clear.

Time magazine ran this headline about the President's inaugural speech: the "(inaugural) address was bold, but following through won't be easy".

Today, Jesus gives a bold inaugural address and, as we know, following through on it wasn't easy. In fact, some argue it cost Jesus his life.

At the end of our lives, how will God judge us according to the plumb line Jesus lays out for us today? How will God judge us?

Amen.

