

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, January 23, 2022

Luke 4:11-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, 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.” And 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.”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So, two decades ago, I had to look it up, a television show captured the imagination of our country. I'm showing my age, but it was one that that I watched throughout college and into graduate school. Extreme makeover home edition. It ran for a decade. During the early 2000s it was one of the most popular prime time television shows. It's actually grown out of another extreme makeover television show. We got done working on people and we decided to work on homes, or at least the network executives did.

So, this fellow, named Ty Pennington, and some other high energy extroverts, who had construction skills, would get together. They'd find a worthy family or individual. They'd find a home that needed some work. They would descend upon that home first with the surprise that you are the lucky recipient of this extreme makeover, and then that “we are starting that work today!” So, tens of people, skilled and unskilled, would descend upon homes, and they would begin what would be days, weeks, months of work. The climax of the show was a big reveal. For us watching at home, there would be on our screens just the barely visible outline of maybe a roof because there would be a big bus right there in front of the house. Y'all remember this, yeah. And then right before the last commercial break, Pennington would say to the bus driver and everyone would join in in screaming, “move that bus!” All we would get just before that last commercial break is a shot of the family, or the individual, and their first sight of their newly made-over home. And then we go to commercial. But you could learn a lot from that initial immediate reaction of a family standing across the street from their home. They've actually seen some of the work done, but they haven't seen the final touches. When that bus moves and we come back from commercial, they react. The last 10 minutes of the show was just their reaction to what they have now seen. They'd go in and be surprised by the kitchen and the bathrooms and the bedrooms. It wasn't timeless design in these homes, but it was fun. Fun for those families and others.

You could learn a lot, though, from the initial look on the faces of the homeowners. This scene in the Gospel of Luke is Jesus's big reveal:

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He has been baptized in the waters of the Jordan, anointed as the Christ by the very Spirit of God. Then he has been drawn by that same spirit into the wilderness where he has been tested, difficult tests, one after another after another. He is hungry; he is thirsty; and yet there is something within him, the very Spirit of God, that allows him to remain faithful through the temptation and the testing in the wilderness. Where we join the text in Luke this day, we hear of that same spirit that anointed him as the Christ in the waters, that led him out into the wilderness. That same spirit filled Christ and compelled him to return to Galilee. And a report about him begin to begin to spread throughout the countryside, and he began to teach in the synagogues.

He became an itinerant preacher, I imagine, right, or a guest liturgist. Everyone who got to experience his leadership in that way began to praise him. Can you imagine the words spreading through that Galilean community, right, from small town to small town to small town? Have you heard about this Jesus guy? Did you hear what happened at his baptism? Then he disappears. We don't know where he goes. Then he comes back, and he starts preaching and leading in worship. He's amazing. You should really show up on a on a sabbath day. Then he makes his way to Nazareth to the place where he grew up. Scripture tells us Jesus heads back to his hometown.

Going back to one's hometown after a long journey is sometimes an interesting experience. Now some of you were born in Memphis. You were raised here. Perhaps you did undergraduate or graduate school here in Memphis, and so the idea of moving away and then coming back it might be a foreign concept to you in some ways. Others of you were born in distant lands. This place called Memphis is rather new to you, so moving away might be something that you're used to. But going back - it's an interesting thing, a homecoming of sorts for Jesus going home.

The interesting thing about what happens when we go home is that the people in our hometown have not been with us on our journey; they have not seen the things that we have seen, live the life that we have lived; they have not known the heartbreak; they have not known the love; they have not known the trials and the temptations, and all of a sudden we are plot back into that place changed people. Our neighbors, who've known us a long time, maybe they expect us to be the same and we're not.

But as was his custom he heads to the synagogue on the sabbath. Even those in his hometown, even though they haven't been with him on his journey to this point, they must know that he needs to be a liturgist. So, he stands up, taking his power, and he's handed this scroll of Isaiah. He unrolls it, and he finds the place where it is said "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" or in other translations "to proclaim the year of the Lord's Jubilee." Jesus has come back to this place that knew him in one way in a very different state. He has been baptized and he has been tempted, and he stands, and he reads.

He rolls it back up and he hands it back to the attendant. And he sits down, and he gives the shortest sermon one can give. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," and the room goes silent.

You see, Jesus understands that they can't have lived what he has lived, not to this point, but he understands this. The words that he chooses to use in this very moment in his big reveal are going to be critical for setting the foundation of everything that is to come. He needs to let

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these people in his hometown know what he is all about. So, he answers a question. What does a faith look like that has been anointed by the spirit in baptism and has shown to be faithful in trial? What does that faith look like in the world? The great reveal is that a spirit anointed resolute faith has a keen focus on the marginalized.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me. For what? What has he anointed me for? To bring good news to the poor; he sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and let the oppressed go free.

This faith, that has been anointed by the spirit and tested and shown to be true, will focus on the poor and those who are imprisoned and those who are blind and those who are oppressed. And we can speak of that figuratively and it's true, but he means it in this way for those who are truly marginalized in society. As Matt Skinner of Luther Seminary points out, "This doesn't mean that the people who had gathered that day in Nazareth in the synagogue weren't included in the good news." But if by any measure they weren't poor in things, they weren't truly imprisoned. They weren't blind and they weren't oppressed, then their inclusion comes with stipulations. It means that in their wealth, in their freedom, in their sight, and in the levity of the oppression that they do not live under, they must understand their rightful place within this gospel that he will proclaim. They must pause and contemplate what it is that is being asked of them as a church.

So, he sits down, and the gospel writer says that the eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. You can learn a lot from the initial immediate look on the faces of the crowd. The Son of Nazareth, Son of Mary, Son of Joseph, Son of God, is inviting the church to reckon with itself. The church must reckon with the claims of this Jesus, this homegrown prophet. They must decide if this ministry is a ministry that they can be on board with.

As if to emphasize his point, he says to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus seems to know what Richard Rohr would later articulate for us, "Just like the prophet Isaiah, Christ in his prophetic preaching knows that there are two ways of being a prophet. One is to tell the enslaved that they can be free. He knows that it is the difficult path of Moses. The second is to tell those who think they are free that they are in fact enslaved. This is the even more difficult path of Jesus". The people have clamored for a savior and now he's come home, and his message is for the poor and the imprisoned and the blind and the oppressed. He has claimed his power and he sits in quiet anticipation of their response.

How will the gathered people hear this message and live it out?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God, Mother of us all.
Amen.