

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, January 19, 2025

As we continue in our worship this day, and as we prepare to hear God's word read and proclaimed, I invite you to join me in the spirit of prayer. Let's pray together.

Snow falls gently outside this morning, oh Lord, and we pray your spirit might fall gently upon us as well, that it might fall upon us and bring a sense of your peace, that it might center us in this time and open us to hear your word. As we hear it, oh God, may it transform us that we might respond as your people. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

And we continue this morning in the Gospel according to Luke. Just last week we celebrated the baptism of our Lord, and we read together of Jesus coming to the banks of the Jordan and being baptized by John there. What we didn't get to and the part that we'll miss by skipping ahead a little bit is that the spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted, and then he comes to his hometown, and that's where we'll pick up the text this day. We'll read together Luke 4:14-21. Let us listen together for God's word to each of us and indeed the Church.

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. 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."

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

So in a few weeks my fourth year of ministry here will draw to a close, and my fifth year will begin, and I'm excited about that, and it's got me reminiscing a bit of what I found when I came here to Idlewild. One of the things that I found was how much stuff had been moved from the

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Jones building during the renovation into this building. okay. We had rooms and rooms, closets and closets full of stuff. The library, which we are...we have now transitioned to what we're calling our Mahjong Ministry Room, the library was chock-full of stuff as well; and in the corner there was this really tall piece of foam board, and on that foam board was something I was unfamiliar with. It was...it had some uh what looked like a cross on it, but a whole lot of words, like several paragraphs, right. And I had to wade through all the boxes of paper and stacks of books to get to it. And what I found on this huge piece of foam board was the mission of Idlewild Presbyterian Church. On most Sundays, if you turn to the back of your bulletin, you see it there too, right? Faithful Presbyterians, faithful Idlewilders had put a lot of time and energy into creating and discerning together the mission of the church. Perhaps some of you were a part of a special committee that was called forward to do that. Perhaps the session did it. I'm not quite sure, but on that big piece of foam board was the mission. But it also had some explanations for why certain things have been chosen, words have been chosen to create that mission statement. I thought it was beautiful to recollect a community of God spending time intentionally together to draft a mission statement, but if I'm being honest with you, I also said to myself, "This feels really complicated. This big piece of foam board with all these things on it feels like a lot of work went into that, and that's beautiful, and I wonder if it's over complicated things a bit."

In the text Jesus returns to the church of his hometown, the synagogue of his hometown, and he goes to worship as was his custom. And when he gets there that day, as Jeanene mentioned to our children, he's invited to be a liturgist, and in that they hand him the scroll of Isaiah. He doesn't choose the text they give him, but he does choose the passage; and he unrolls it, and he goes to what we now remember together as Isaiah 61, and he says to the people, "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 proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." What Jesus is doing in that moment is presenting to the congregation the mission statement of his ministry, and it's not a mission statement that he has spent time reflecting upon on his own and creating. He is drawing from the mission of the God of all time and space, drawing from the Prophet's words, claiming them as his own work, and proclaiming that mission to those who have gathered that day. And then he sits down, and as Jeanene mentions, he points to the scroll, and he says, "Today this prophecy has been fulfilled in your hearing." He says to the people, "I am the one who will accomplish and is accomplishing this mission of God." And initially the people are amazed. But in the text that follows, however, we get a different sort of response. If Jesus would have stopped there, it would have been okay, but instead he goes on preaching a little bit more. And that extra bit of preaching gets him in a whole lot of trouble, enough trouble that all the people go from praising him to pushing him out of the synagogue and up to a hillside. And if you all are familiar with the text from the Gospel of Luke, they want to

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push him off of it, until he moves through them in his divinely powerful way and goes along to do the work of the mission and ministry of God. When he proclaims the mission that he is inaugurating, that mission and that Jesus meet resistance. His own people, people who have covenanted to love and care for him, they are at first excited and then scared and disappointed, because the mission and work that Jesus proclaims from the Gospel or, excuse me, from the prophet Isaiah, it is an unwanted message to the privileged and the powerful. The people are not simply resistant to his preaching, they are resistant to being fully aligned with the mission of God in the world. “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 proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

We would do well to pay attention here to this scene because it has more to do with us than we might first imagine. It is critically important for those of us who claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ to understand clearly the mission that he is proclaiming, because our purpose, or the purpose of the true Christian, is to be fully aligned with the mission of Jesus. That means that we are called to align our lives in every way to the life of Jesus, to value what he valued, to champion the causes he championed, to become, as Paul describes, “imitators of Christ.” Yet if we are honest, then we might find resistance both within ourselves and the wider Christian community to this calling. Even the Christian, or those who identify as Christian, can resist aligning with the mission of Jesus. In fact, I would posit to you that most Christians, especially in America, have little desire to be aligned with the life that Jesus led and the values he embodied. Their Christianity has almost nothing to do with aligning with the actual priorities of Jesus or following the patterns of his spirituality. What we could term Cultural Christianity is unconcerned with the priorities that Jesus inaugurates in the Gospel of Luke. We see this to be true across the great arc of our history here too. We see it in the history that we celebrate this weekend, actually tomorrow. We'll celebrate Martin Luther King Jr, his life and his ministry amongst us. Many of you are aware because you are historians that King was certainly unpopular during his extensive work for racial reconciliation and equality here in America and across the world, but it was his work with the Poor People's Campaign that really seemed to get under people's skin. Works straight out of Isaiah 61—good news to the poor, and yet many who call themselves Christian in that time...in his time despised him. Bernice King has taken to annually reminding us of this fact in a regular social media post. She says. “Please do not act like everyone loved my father. He was assassinated in 1967.” AO??? reflected that he was one of the most hated men in America, most hated. Many who quote him now and evoke him to deter justice today would likely hate, and may already hate, the authentic King. Many who call themselves Christian would be resistant to his message, straight out of the prophet Isaiah.

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But it's not simply Cultural Christians who are resistant to the mission and ministry of Jesus. We don't like being convicted by the life and the mission of Jesus either. Those of us who show up even every week to worship and to be formed as disciples, we too can be and even are resistant to the mission of Jesus. This past week I was at Columbia Theological Seminary. That's the Seminary where I graduated. It's where Mary graduated from as well. It's a place dear to my heart. I get the privilege of serving on the board there. Just celebrated three years on the board and had me reminiscing. We were in the chapel of Herrington Center, a center named after a prominent preacher in the Atlanta area. We were there doing some really important business this week, all of us dressed in our nice Sunday Best reminded me of my first meeting three years ago. We were all dressed in pretty much the same thing, talking about the business of the church. During each of our meetings we have people from outside of the body of the board come and speak to us. Three years ago we had a seminary classmate of mine, a fellow that I played basketball with twice a week every week at a little Methodist Church in downtown dear???. I knew him well; but when he walked in the room three years ago, he looked different to me, looked a little worn from about 10 years of ministry. His posture was more serious than I remembered it being on the basketball court. He came that day to tell us about his ministry, the ministry he was doing with those experiencing homelessness in Atlanta. He talked for a good while about the difficulties of that work, about how it had made him reflect deeply upon his life and his privilege. And then he looked up at us from his notes. He looked slowly across the room, panning each of us dressed perfectly, looking at him, drinking our coffee; and he said, "Listen, I know our ministries aren't the same. I smell a lot more like sheep than shepherd. You smell like shepherds, but I worship one whom I call the shepherd, and he's called me to be amongst the sheep...sheep. And you could have heard a pin drop. The ways in which his words pierced our safe and privileged positions as pastors and lay people and board members. He was reminding us, yay convicting us, that to be a Christian is to be fully aligned with the mission of Jesus.

It's not just cultural Christians or even those who are privileged in some ways by position. It's also those of us who might consider ourselves well-informed and even learned Christians. We can be resistant to the mission of Jesus as well. Soren Kierkegaard, I've spoken part of this quote from this pulpit before, he says this about those who are well intentioned, well informed, and learned in their practice of the faith. "The matter is quite simple. The Bible is very easy to understand," he says, "but we Christians are a bunch of scheming swindlers. We pretend to be unable to understand it because we know very well that the minute we understand, we are obliged to act accordingly. Take any word from the New Testament, and forget everything except pledging yourself to act accordingly. My God, you will say, if I do that my whole life will be ruined. How would I ever get on in the world.? Herein lies the real place of Christian

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scholarship. Christian scholarship is the church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible, to ensure that we can continue to be good Christians without the Bible coming too close. Oh, prince of scholarship, what would we do without you? Dreadful it is to fall into the hands of the Living God." Yes, it is even dreadful to be alone with the words of the New Testament. Those of us who consider ourselves well informed and learned should hear a pin drop this morning as Kierkegaard pierces our pretentious understanding of Christian faith. And for all of us, resisting the mission of Christ in the world has eternal implications. Let me be clear that nothing delights the powers and principalities that uphold evil more than Christians and a Christian Church who despise the calling of Jesus, who will sit and be joyful for a moment and then resist it, even push that Jesus out of the place of worship and up to a hill. Jesus unrolled the Scroll of Isaiah, and he turned to 61. I want to read you more fully the passage.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of Vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who mourn in Zion, to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called Oaks of Righteousness, the planting of the Lord to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins. They shall raise up the former devastations. They shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations."

So I wonder...I wonder if Jesus's inauguration of his ministry in that synagogue so many years ago might greet us again on this weekend. I wonder if on this weekend when we not only celebrate Martin Luther King Jr., but we together mark the inauguration of the new president, I wonder if Jesus's inaugural address might convict us once again, because the message seems quite clear. God has sent this Jesus to "bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners." Would that we, those who call upon the name of Jesus, those who call ourselves indeed the body of Christ, the Church in the world, may respond and be aligned with the mission and ministry of our Savior. May we, those who call upon the name of Jesus, do everything in ours and the spirit's power to be aligned with his mission. May it convict us this day. May it ultimately renew our fidelity to caring for the poor and binding up the brokenhearted, to preaching good news to the captive and release to the prisoner; and may we, in that proclamation and in that mission, proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

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