

January 25, 2004
GOOD NEWS FOR TODAY

I've got some good news and bad news. Which do you want to hear first? Don't you just hate it when someone asks you that question? I prefer to hear unadulterated good news. Don't water it down with bad news.

Today's lesson from the gospel of Luke is my kind of lesson. It's unadulterated good news, good news about what God is doing here and now. Jesus Christ, according to this passage has come to earth to proclaim "good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind."

Of course you could rightfully protest that this "news" about Jesus is no longer news at all. How many years has it been since he has come and gone? You could argue that a word about Jesus Christ is not news but ancient history. And maybe that's the problem for a lot of us. We do not think of Christian faith as something that is relevant for our lives today.

I believe that the power of Christ's Spirit is just as full of surprises and possibilities for the living of this day as it was when Jesus first preached this short sermon long ago. Trouble is ... we cannot see his work among us. He comes among us where we live even today, but we do not recognize him. We do not expect salvation to come in such a common way.

I love to read cookbooks. My specialty is outdoor cooking. Now on the face of it, reading a cookbook is a little like reading the dictionary. It's very, very boring unless you plan to put that knowledge into practice. If that's true, everything changes.

Then, as you read the ingredients you can almost taste what the final product will be like. You can feel the smooth, cool sour cream. You can smell the pungent odor of freshly ground pepper. Perhaps you remember how good a similar dish was that you had eaten before. And well, you get the idea!

We don't get the much out of a cookbook until we put that knowledge into practice. And the same is true with God's Word. The Word of God can be compared to a recipe. "The proof is in the pudding."

Our greatest treat comes when we choose to act here and now on the words that God has given us in Jesus Christ, when we decide to "taste and see that the Lord is good." (Psalm 34:8)

THE YEAR OF JUBILEE

One of the greatest laws in the Old Testament was never put into practice. It was called the Year of Jubilee. The year of Jubilee was supposed to occur every fifty years. It was to be a time of restoration for those "down on their luck." Debts were to be dropped with no questions asked. Those sold into slavery would regain their freedom. Mortgaged lands were to be returned to their original owners. In the year of Jubilee, the slate was wiped clean. Everyone was given a fresh start.

And though there is no record that it was ever implemented, the year of Jubilee remained a symbol of hope for a future kingdom. "When the Messiah comes," the people would say, "then we will celebrate the Year of Jubilee. When the Messiah comes, God's salvation will be experienced by all people."

Then Jesus came. The Bible tells us that he was baptized with power by the Holy Spirit. He was tested in the wilderness, much like Moses and the Israelites had been tested long ago. And he could preach. His preaching was unlike any the people had ever heard. There was power and promise in what he said. He spoke as one who had authority. He said what only God could say,

and he did what only God could do. The crowds were growing and they followed him everywhere.

So this sets the stage Jesus' dramatic visit to Nazareth, his home town. This is the synagogue where Jesus learned to worship and pray, sing the Psalms and memorize the Scriptures. People have always loved a local boy makes good story. So they are ready to hear what he will say and see what he will do.

The synagogue was packed that day, and they honor Jesus by asking him to read the Scripture. He responds by reading from the prophet Isaiah,

[18] '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,
[19] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19 (NRSV)

When Jesus finished reading he sat down to interpret the Scripture. You could have heard a pin drop as everyone eagerly awaited his sermon. Jesus said simply, "Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

The time of waiting is over. The year of Jubilee, the time of forgiveness and salvation for all people has finally come in the person of Jesus. End of sermon.

ARE WE READY FOR JUBILEE?

Maybe the people had expected a sermon about the past, about the words of the prophet Isaiah and how God delivered exiles from captivity. But, Jesus didn't speak about the past, the "there and then." Jesus spoke about the present, the "here and now." Jesus said, "Today the Scripture is fulfilled." Jesus claimed to personally possess the Spirit of God, and he claimed to be the very one in whom the prophetic words were fulfilled.

That was the problem. We religious, hometown folk find it comfortable to talk about what God has done in the past ... to tell and retell the story of Moses and Isaiah and Jesus and Paul. It's also okay to think about the future, the day when God's kingdom will come in power. We pray for peace some day. We pray for economic justice ... some day.

But, suppose that day is now? Suppose Jesus is telling us that today the hope of God's kingdom is to be fulfilled here and now through us? How we would we feel about that?

I suspect we wouldn't feel so comfortable about that message. We love the world as we know it too much. We like who we are and how we are. But, the Bible tells us that we can't get comfortable with this world. The kingdom of God is about a whole new way of thinking and a whole new way of living.

Jesus was baptized with the Spirit of God and after he ascended into heaven, his people, the church were baptized with that same Spirit. And those so baptized began to preach and live the same message that Jesus had preached and lived before them.

Faith was more than a doctrine for the early church. The year of Jubilee had become a reality, a present way of living for the early church. Peace and justice were not just high ideals. They were lived out in the community of faith. It was a community based upon sharing everything money, meals and a common faith. The early church became a living testament to the love they had for God and for each other. Every day the Scriptures were fulfilled by the power of Christ's Spirit.

So I come this morning preaching that same short sermon.
"Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

LOOK UP INSTEAD OF ABOUT

What does that mean? Does that mean all our problems will go away? Not at all. Those who decided to follow Jesus paid a very high price for daring to break with the ways of the world. We too will pay a price for following Jesus.

But, following Jesus is not about problem solving.
Following Jesus is about living a life with meaning and purpose.

John Bunyan graphically captured our dismal failure to realize the power of the present moment. In the illustrated copies of "Pilgrim's Progress" there is a picture of a man with a muckrake in his hand. He's old, bent and careworn. And his eyes are fastened on the things of this world.

Meanwhile a shining angel stands over his head, offering him a crown. But, the man can't see it. He never looks up. All he can see is routine of work and daily chores. Bunyan writes, "Could'st thou in vision see ... thyself, the man God meant; Thou never more could'st be the man thou art, content."

Psychologists tell us to look within. Opportunists tell us to look around. Optimists tell us to look ahead. Pessimists tell us to look out!

But, the Holy Spirit encourages us to look up. As the Bible puts it, "Lift up your heads because your redemption is drawing near." (Luke 21:28) In other words, dare to reinterpret your life through the eyes of faith. Live this day and every day in the hopeful light of God's salvation in Jesus Christ.

GOD IS WITH US TODAY

People have always taken offense at the idea that God can bring salvation here and now through the one who is known to us. Just look what happened to Jesus. At first they spoke well of him. But, then there were signs of discontent, "Isn't this Joseph's son?" In other words, "Who is this guy to say that the kingdom is coming here and now? How can the kingdom of God come through this one that we know so well?"

They were wrong of course. He wasn't Joseph's son. He was the Son of God. But, they didn't recognize divinity when it came in such a familiar package.

Could it be that the same thing happens even today? We don't recognize the presence of God when he comes in ways that are too familiar. We cannot hear good news in his message of salvation for the poor, captive and oppressed because we do not see ourselves in that light. We don't see ourselves as sinners in desperate need of God's grace.

Apparently the folks at Nazareth didn't see themselves as sinners desperately needing the grace of God either. They wanted salvation on their own terms. They wanted their problems solved. They wanted miracles.

Aren't we the same way? Don't we think of faith in Jesus as a way to get our diseases healed and our problems solved? But, the purpose of God in Christ goes beyond our needs and dreams. If we are to see Jesus today, we need a different way of looking at things. We need to dream of a larger, unexpected salvation that turns everything upside down.

Joseph Donders, a Catholic priest who works in Africa, in a sermon on this passage, referred to a Kenyan theologian who said that his people, the Akamba, have a very two dimensional view of time: a very long past and an extremely dynamic present. He wrote, "The future as we know it in the linear concept of time is virtually non-existent."

According to Donders, we Christians would also do well to have that concept of time, a very long past and an extremely dynamic now. Today is the day for the coming of God's kingdom into our lives. Today is the day justice is done, peace is made and swords are hammered into ploughshares. He wrote, "If we only believe that God's kingdom is something of the future, we will never see that kingdom at all."

Henri Nouwan talks about the importance of silence in prayer. He wrote, "Deep silence leads us to suspect that, in the first place, prayer is acceptance. When we pray we are standing with our hands open to the world. We know that God will show himself in the nature which surrounds us, in the people we meet, in the situations we run into."

In other words, when we pray, we need to be open to the possibility that those prayers will be answered here and now through the common people and experiences of life. This is the essence of faith, believing the promise of Jesus that "Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

REJECTING GOD'S PRESENCE

Unfortunately, we religious people can also be some of the most unbelieving people in the world. For some reason we have a hard time accepting the prophet whom God sends our way.

This was the thought behind what Jesus told his hometown folks. He said, "No prophet is accepted in his home town." And then he illustrated that point with several stories from the Old Testament.

The first story was about the time when God sent the prophet Elijah to the people of Israel, but God's people ran him off. They didn't recognize he was God's messenger. They preferred the prophets of the false god Baal over the one true God.

And so the truly miraculous event takes place in another land. There were many widows in Israel during the great famine of those days, but it was a widow in Zaraphath in the region of Sidon who showed enough faith to care for God's servant. And, as a result, it was she and her son who received bread from the hand of God.

Jesus' second story from the Hebrew Scriptures was about the prophet Elijah's successor, Elisha. It seems that Elisha not only displayed God's healing power outside of Israel he even had the temerity to heal an enemy. It was the commander of the Syrian Army whom God chose to heal of his leprosy. Why did God chose to heal Naaman when there were so many lepers in the land of Israel who needed to be healed?

I think that Jesus was trying to show the hometown folks (and us) that the kingdom of God is more than we can ever imagine. And if we fail to accept that kingdom, God will take that salvation to a more receptive audience. The kingdom of God is an unexpected salvation which can be as close as our home town but it can also be as far reaching as our most distant enemy.

The hometown folks didn't care for Jesus' interpretation of Scripture. Salvation for enemies has never been one of the more popular biblical themes. In fact, they were so upset at what he had to say that they were going to throw him off a cliff.

But, they could not stop him. The Scripture tells us that he walked right through that angry crowd and went on his way.

And so, sadly, those who thought that they knew Jesus the best proved by their actions that they didn't really know him at all. Like their fathers and mothers before them, they rejected the salvation of God when it came knocking at their very door.

THE TREASURE TO BE FOUND AT HOME

About a hundred years ago Russell Conwell told a story in a famous speech entitled "Acres of Diamonds." It was about a boy he knew growing up in Massachusetts who went to Yale and became a mining engineer. He was a brilliant student, and Yale offered him a job as an instructor after his graduation. But, he turned it down because he had gold fever, and wanted to go to California to make his fortune.

He persuaded his widowed mother to sell the family farm and come with him to California to find gold. He never found it, and Conwell said that the last he heard the young man was working in Minnesota at a salary less than Yale had first offered him.

But, the man who bought the farm in Massachusetts from the young engineer was harvesting potatoes one day, carrying a bushel through an opening in one of those rock walls. The basket wouldn't go through, so he put it on the ground to push it through. As he was leaning over, his eye caught a particularly shiny rock in the wall. Curious, he removed it, and had it assayed it was native silver worth a fortune.

The young engineer had passed through the gate for years and years and he never noticed the treasure that was already there. He never noticed it because he never dreamed that a treasure could be found so easily and so close to home.

We can be the same way. We think that we must do some great thing to get the treasure of life work for years, get an education, take a chance in the gold fields of the world. But, the fact of the matter is this. The treasure of life is right here in our home town. Today the Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Today the Spirit of Jesus is among us. But, how will we respond to his unexpected presence? Will it be a day of salvation or day of judgment?

It's ironic that the Messiah the folks in Nazareth had hoped and prayed for was right there with them all along. But, they blew it. They weren't open to receiving God's message. They were so near and yet so far away.

THE TEMPTATION OF PROCRASTINATION

C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Screwtape Letters* relates the advice supposedly given an apprentice demon by a more experienced devil. The young demon's job is to tempt mortals into trusting something other than God. In this way, of course, their souls are won for the devil.

But, the apprentice demon has a hard time tempting one of the mortals assigned to him. Try as he might to place doubt about God in the man's mind, there was no progress. The more experienced demon suggested a better approach. He said, "Don't attack his beliefs head on. Instead say, 'Sure there's a God. Sure there are decisions to be made. But, what's the rush. Do it tomorrow.' Tomorrow of course will never come, and he'll be yours for eternity."

Perhaps we too are tempted to put off Christ until tomorrow, and so, when he walks right through our midst, we never see him because we are not looking for him. Don't make that mistake. Today is the time of decision and salvation. Today the Scripture is fulfilled in our hearing. May God help us respond with faith.

Amen.