

January 24, 2016

TEXT: Luke 4:14–21

TITLE: You Heard it Here First

On Labor Day of 1960, JFK “uttered the first variation of ‘ask not what your country can do for you’ in (the city of) Detroit. And not quite three years later, “on June 23, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. came to town, walked down Woodward Avenue with more than 100,000 people and delivered the first major public iteration of his ‘I Have A Dream’ speech, two months before his renowned speech in Washington.”¹ And even as MLK was calling for unity and a nonviolent path toward civil rights, in November of that year, Malcom X delivered his most famous address, “The Message to the Grass Roots,” a cry against integration, in King Solomon Baptist Church in Detroit.

Why Detroit? So many words and phrases that seem to summarize the mission of great leaders of the 1960s had their first public audience in Detroit. Words we attribute to an inaugural address, words we connect to the greatest rallying cry of the civil rights movement, and even Lindon B. Johnson’s use of the term “Great Society”—originated in the city that gave us Motown and the automotive industry and Sonny Bono.

In “Once in A Great City” journalist and author David Maraniss, explores Detroit between October 1962 and the spring of ’64 when Detroit, MI was at its heyday. In this season, cars, the labor movement, the civil rights movement and Motown were all at their peak—even though the threat of the auto industry moving was looming large in the distance. Detroit was a hub for Democratic party politics and the labor movement. And with regards to race relations and civil rights, Detroit was an exaggerated microcosim of the United States. And so in this vibrant season of Detroit’s history, the city became the first main stage for many of the bright ideas and dynamic minds that would shape our nation’s history. More people may have heard King speak from the steps of the Lincoln memorial, but a hundred thousands of protestors in Detroit could always retain bragging rights, and say “We heard it here first.”

Our bible passage takes us to another inaugural address of sorts. In our text for today we read another speech that framed the legacy of one who would shape culture and change the world. Fresh from his baptism and 40-day stay in the wilderness, Jesus returns home to Nazareth assured of who he is and what he is about. He knows that his carpenter days are over. It’s time for him to get out into the world and begin his public ministry. It’s time for him to call disciples and heal the sick and welcome the outcast. But first, as is his custom Jesus goes to the temple on the Sabbath day. There he reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah the words we heard today:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

To a community already associating this text with the anticipated coming of the Messiah, Jesus announces: “It is me. I am the Messiah. I’m the one who has come to set all people free.”

¹ <http://www.npr.org/2016/01/14/463010089/super-bowl-commercial-inspires-maraniss-to-write-about-detroit-s-better-times>

The messianic charge is filled with redemptive change. Salvation, we are reminded, comes not only in the form of spiritual renewal but in the form of social awakening and renewed living. Justice is at the heart of this message—a brand of justice that prioritizes the marginalized, welcomes the outcast, and cares for the weak and the wounded. The Messiah will change the world—not only in the life that is to come, but in the here and now. Jesus’ message is clear: Things are about to change. The blind will see; the oppressed shall be liberated; the captive shall go free. And to the people of his small hometown—a group of people who will soon try to run him off a cliff—he announces: “You’ve heard it here first.”

The words of Jesus’ address to the people are words that set the tone for his whole ministry. He has not come to maintain the status quo, but to shift power, include the outsider, and offer wholeness—not for just a select few but for all. His message will make some people uncomfortable. Some will even feel threatened. But as Jesus prepares to leave his hometown, call disciples, and teach and heal and feed others in God’s name, he states his purpose boldly. The words of Isaiah become his mission statement. They order his whole ministry. The words he reads are what he is about.

One commentator writes:

Luke wants us to know how Jesus’ ministry began upon this earth. It began when the Holy Spirit claimed him in baptism, tested him in the wilderness, and filled him with power for an urgent ministry of grace to the downtrodden in this world. The Holy Spirit came and taught Jesus what was real: to say no to the false options and temptations in this world and yes to God’s good purposes for all people; to say no to self-glory in all its forms and yes to helping the poor and the captured of all kinds; to say no to trying to get your God to work for you and yes to working for your God with urgency and compassion.

For hearers of our day, for Christians gathered in this place and time, Christ’s message is as radical and life-changing—and perhaps scary and exciting—as it was 2000 years ago. We worship and pray in an era where many proclaim that salvation will come through other means: through wealth, through military domination, through the shoring up of our borders. There are those who try to assert that the road to salvation is paved by narrowly defining the word “us” and then limiting the rights of those who “don’t belong.” There are those whose sense of salvation comes by elevating themselves over and above others—sometimes even using scripture to craft claims that reinforce their biases that subordinate others, rather than examining their biases in light of scripture’s call to love.

In this presidential election season, we hear the voices of “wanna be leaders”—who quote Scripture (or try to), but then misapply it. We hear the rhetoric of each candidate’s platform and wonder what and whom we can truly trust. We try to weed out the one-liners, gauge integrity, and discern in whom we should place our hope for the future. And we try to articulate for ourselves what it is that we believe so that we can hold each candidate up to the litmus test of our own ethics.

The circumstances of our world demand that we know what it is that WE stand for. And the text creates the space for us to ask that question of our own hearts: “What is our own personal mission statement? What beliefs inform our actions? What are we about? What do we stand for?”

The message of Jesus in our text today distills it down for us and serves as a plumb line when it comes to us living a life of faith. Jesus’ words today orient us to the heart of the message of

Christ—and to our call as his followers. Our text reminds us that Christ’s mission and ministry is not only other-wordly. Jesus is not simply about saving souls for heaven. Rather, Jesus saves bodies too...and spirits, and relationships, and communities.

Whether healing an unnamed woman with a bleeding condition, eating dinner at the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector; feeding thousands at once or raising the centurion’s daughter from the dead, Jesus comes to offer new and abundant life to all. Luke links our salvation to the salvation of others: for in his definition salvation is not a prize for a select few, but rather a state of radical well-being most thoroughly experienced in community. Salvation is not won on the backs of our brothers and sisters, but rather is most truly known when ALL are well and whole once more.

As Christians we are called to participate in this ministry of Christ. We are called to be a part of this welcoming, liberating, table-turning good news. We are called to get off of our couches and out from behind our screens and look in the eyes of our brothers and sisters, to see their aching need. We are called to use our gifts to lift others up: to work for justice, to feed those who are hungry; to clothe those who are naked. We are called to envision and work for a day when true justice will prevail and where reconciliation will breed peace.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. articulates this vision when he calls humanity to work together to create the Beloved Community. This vision includes the eradication of poverty, hunger, homelessness and oppression. It calls for an end to all racism and discrimination; it calls for a peaceful resolution to conflict over a show of military strength. “Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail...”²

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. says, following the Supreme Court’s decision integrating buses in Montgomery in 1956, this:

“the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the Beloved Community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opponents into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men.”³

Our call is, quite simply, to love: to love not only those who live under our roof, but those whose names we do not know. We are called to love those who are different from us and those whose needs compete with our own. We are called to love when we disagree, and perhaps even when we have been hurt. We are called to put that love in action—even when enacting love is difficult or risky, or is simply hard work. As followers of Jesus, we are called to incarnate his message of radical love, just as God’s message of radical love for us was made incarnate in Jesus Christ.

And the good news is that we are sent forth to do this work by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are led, equipped, convicted and transformed by God’s Spirit who is with us always. God’s faithfulness gives us cause to hope, for through God the impossible is attainable, and love can win.

² - See more at: <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4>

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So as you shovel snow or cuddle up under a warm afghan this afternoon, ask yourselves: “What do I stand for? What am I about?” Let Christ’s example and redemptive power inform your sense of what is possible—through even you—by God’s grace. Pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that your will and purpose might be in line with God’s. Then get some rest, have some warm soup, and get ready—for there is plenty more work to be done.

Amen.