

**January 27, 2019**

**TEXT: Luke 4:16–30**

**TITLE: The Power of Prophetic Voices**

*By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

Let me ask you a question: How do you organize things? You'd likely answer, "Well, that depends on what we're talking about. Books are organized alphabetically or by subject. Tools are organized by size and function. Spices are organized by frequency of use. Socks—well, they're just thrown together in one drawer." How you organize things can be a very personal choice, and we find a fascinating example of this in today's gospel lesson.

Matthew, Mark and Luke had a lot of material about Jesus' life that they had to organize—miracle stories, teachings, accounts of Jesus' death and resurrection. Thirty or forty years after Jesus' ministry ended a lot of stories had been passed on about him. Picture this stuff all piled up on gospel writers' tables, which they have to organize in some way. The simplest approach would have been chronological—organize everything in terms of what happened first. But 2000 years ago, people weren't as fixated on time as we are, and the stories about Jesus were too random to put in a strict chronological order. Matthew and Mark were aware of the story of Jesus' visit to his hometown synagogue. They knew that Jesus was already famous by the time he went to Nazareth, so they put this story about 1/3 the way into their gospel. But Luke looked at the same story differently. He saw in this story a summary of everything else that was going to follow. So he chose to place it near the beginning of his gospel—which means we need to look carefully at this story so we see in it what Luke saw in it, and take away from it the good news Luke wanted us to hear.

This gospel story has both snapshot and "big picture" elements in it. There's the snapshot of Jesus visiting the synagogue in his hometown—even as there's the big picture of Jesus who came to earth as the Savior for all people. There's the snapshot of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue and the listeners were amazed at his wisdom, even as there's the big picture of Jesus' words being shared with the thousands of people who flocked to listen to him. There's the grim snapshot of the synagogue crowd growing angry at Jesus and trying to throw him off a cliff, which points to the big picture of Jesus' later arrest and crucifixion in Jerusalem. And just as Luke ends this story with the snapshot of Jesus passing unharmed through the midst of the angry mob, Luke ends his gospel with the resurrected Christ defeating the power of death on Easter Sunday.

So how do the details of this story from Luke 4 help us with the big picture of our own life? In three ways: This story tells us to speak what is true—live as faithful witnesses - and trust the ways of non-violence.

Speak what is true. The synagogue services back in Jesus' time were not formal affairs. People would gather for prayers, for reading and discussing scriptures, and to collect alms for the poor. The synagogue was a religious space, a community center and a place for solving disputes or administering justice. In that religious-political space, Jesus

intentionally chose a provocative passage to read out loud—words from the prophet Isaiah saying “I have come to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives, and to let the oppressed go free.”

Did Jesus’ words immediately mean all the poor were blessed, all the captives were free, and all the oppressed greeted with justice? No, but proclamation must always precede implementation. The writing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 did not immediately turn the British colonies into American states. That would only come after the eight years of the Revolutionary War. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed how he had a dream in which people were judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, which propelled forward the Civil Rights movement, but we have still not reached that goal. Proclamation precedes implementation; that is why Christians insist on proclaiming the good news and speaking prophetically what we know in Christ to be true so that the world may hear and implement it.

Sometimes the truth we speak includes good news the world has overlooked. Newspaper columnist Nicholas Kristof recently reminded us of the good news that every day last year almost 300,000 around the world got electricity for the first time or had access to clean drinking water for the first time; and as many as 600,000 people a day had access to the internet for the first time—getting exposure to teaching tools and information that could change their lives forever. We need to celebrate those stories, even as we continue to remind the world of the work that still needs to be done—the need to fix our health care system to reduce child mortality rates and racially-biased access to treatment, to continue to protect the rights of transgender people who work in jobs or serve in the military, to speak out against words and actions that denigrate Native Americans in this land.

If we honestly follow Christ’s example and speak what is true to a world that ignores good news and rejects challenging truths, then we will be led to do the next step as well—to live as faithful witnesses wherever God has placed us. I recently sat with six other Presbyterian pastors to discuss how we can work for racial reconciliation in our congregational life. We recognized how hard it can be to talk about racism—to acknowledge how white privilege means many of us never have to deal with prejudice on a daily basis. But we affirmed that the answer lay in trying to do what is right both in action and in spirit. We seek an ethic of justice and an ethos of justice—a spirit of justice that moves through our lives and relationships, both for us individually and for everyone we meet.

Here’s a broad example. When the Hubble Space Telescope was deployed in 1990, it had some initial technical problems—something the NASA scientists called “a bad case of the jitters.” When the solar panels moved between sunlight and darkness, they would start flapping and mess up the long exposure images being taken of distant galaxies. It turned out that the Hubble was modeled after an earlier military satellite, and when a NASA scientist attended a meeting at the Pentagon to describe the “jitters” problem with the Hubble, a bunch of heads around the table started nodding in recognition—which infuriated the scientist. He realized the military had known about this design flaw but not

shared that information with NASA before they launched the Hubble telescope.<sup>1</sup> The ethics of military secrecy kept important information from their colleagues in NASA; whereas an ethos, a spirit, of working for the common good would have shared the information and done what was right and beneficial to all concerned.

The church is called to be a place where the ethos of Christ is made real. That means we are to be a place of welcome, compassion, hospitality, and faithful witness. We are doing a free meal on Tuesday for federal workers and their families affected by the recent government shutdown. Why? Lots of reasons: Because the President's shutdown was foolish and petty, because hardworking people have gone without paychecks for over a month, because it is a way to say "thank you" for loyal service and to help out neighbors who are struggling to make ends meet. Will it solve our nation's problems? No. But will it be a witness of Christ's care and welcome and justice-mercy? With your help, yes, I hope so. The lesson here is that wherever we find ourselves, if we embody an ethos of faith and justice in whatever little ways we can, God will take care of the rest.

The last part of Jesus' experience in the Nazareth synagogue is perhaps the most painful to remember, but is also the most important. The hometown crowd turned on Jesus and literally tried to kill him. Why? He angered them by not doing lots of miracles for them, and worse, by suggesting that God's love extended to the folks outside the synagogue walls as much as, if not more than, it did to those within the walls. Challenging existing power structures with a message of love and mercy would be problematic all of Jesus' life. The mob mentality that led to Jesus' crucifixion was also active in Nazareth. Jesus did not rail against those people, nor call down lightning and fire. We're told he faced the crowd and walked back through the midst of them and went on his way.

Something made the crowd stop. Something made the crowd part and give way. I believe it was because violence was not met with violence. Jesus showed them—shows us—a better way—the way of nonviolence. It seems illogical in our world of military generals around Pentagon tables and impossible in a world of nuclear weapons and suicide bombers. I don't deny that. But thanks to Luke, this is the story we've been given—the prophetic voice that has spoken us. We are asked to trust this story and trust the One whom the story is about.

Luke organized things so that today we would hear how the Spirit of the Lord breaks into our worship space to share good news—news of release, recovery, and freedom. News of prophetic power and nonviolent methods. It may be given to us in a brief snapshot from long ago, but it captures the wisdom of the big picture—God's big picture. By grace, even today, may its good news be fulfilled in our lives and in our hearing. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Carson, "The Final Frontier," book review New York Times, November 18, 2018, p. 12.