

January 27, 2019 – Journey worship

TEXT: Luke 4:16–22

TITLE: Transforming Words

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Something in the beginning of a movie or a book can set the tone for everything that follows. Remember the opening of the first Star Wars' movie, when after the slanted story synopsis scrolled by, the next thing you saw was the ominous form of a Star Destroyer battleship filling the screen? Or remember how Dickens' novel "A Tale of Two Cities" began: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair." Words and images can set the tone for what comes next. But sometimes a few words capture the plot of an entire narrative—and in the New Testament, often those types of powerful words come from quoting the prophets. The book of Acts opens with the ascension of Jesus and then quickly moves to the day of Pentecost—a day in which the frightened disciples, huddled in an upper room, are touched by God's fire and spirit and sent out into the crowded Jerusalem streets to proclaim to all that Jesus is the risen Christ. The apostle Peter is the one who explains what's going on and he does so by quoting the Old Testament prophet Joel, saying: *God declares I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young people shall see visions...before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.* The whole book of Acts is shaped by that prophecy. It is a book that tells how God's spirit moved through the land, so that Jews, Gentiles, slave and free, all learned about the risen Christ and the Lord's kingdom of justice.

In a comparable way, the gospel writer of Luke uses a quote from the prophets to lay the framework for his entire book. Luke opens with a prologue about John the Baptist and the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem. Then he jumps ahead to Jesus' baptism and temptation in the wilderness, before having Jesus officially begin his earthly ministry in his hometown of Nazareth. There in that synagogue Jesus gives his first sermon. Now synagogues back in that day and age were somewhat informal places. People gathered there to say their prayers, to read and discuss scripture, and collect alms for the poor. But it was more than a place for religion. It was a gathering spot, a community center, and an institution where disputes were settled and justice meted out.

Jesus very intentionally started his ministry in that place, and just as intentionally started it with a particular reading of scripture. It takes four verbs to describe what happened that day: Jesus stood up to read; he received the scroll of the prophet Isaiah; he unrolled the scroll; and he found the place he was looking for. There was likely a moment of anticipation and then Jesus read two verses from Isaiah 61: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, 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.* After which, while everyone looked at him intently, Jesus announced: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

The rest of Luke's gospel is basically an exposition on those words—how the Spirit of the Lord, the indwelling of God's fullness and righteousness, was upon Jesus; how he'd come to bring good news, release, freedom and favor; and that it was not a future, pie-in-the-sky prophecy but something that was happening right before their eyes, and our eyes as well. This Old Testament quotation—these words in the synagogue were meant to transform his audience. The question is whether or not we're open to letting them transform us.

When Jesus stood up in that Nazareth synagogue and read what he read, should we imagine that everything he said immediately became true? Did Jesus' words effectively confer blessing upon all the poor, freedom upon all the captives, and grant justice to all the oppressed in the world? No, not immediately. But then, 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 long years of the Revolutionary War. Or when Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed how he had a dream in which people would be judged by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, he propelled forward the Civil Rights movement with that speech, but we have still not reached that goal. Proclamation precedes implementation. We say what we believe so that what we believe can, in time and by God's grace, truly be implemented.

Second, Jesus read aloud words that were familiar to the folks in the synagogue, but there was something about choosing those particular verses from Isaiah that caused the audience to hear that passage in a whole different way. Years ago, there was a Jewish rabbi who had been known for his wisdom from the time he was a youth. For example, when he was young, he was asked this: "Naphtali, if you tell me where God can be found, I'll give you a golden coin." After a pause, the boy replied, "And I'll give you two gold coins if you can tell me where God can not be found." (Elie Wiesel, *Four Hasidic Masters*)

Jesus as a 12-year old boy amazed the teachers and scribes in the temple of Jerusalem with his wisdom and knowledge. And before this sermon in Nazareth, supposedly Jesus had already been performing miracles and healing people in the nearby town of Capernaum. So when Jesus chose a passage that had long been associated with the coming Messiah, everyone's ears perked up. When he spoke of good news, freedom, release, and the Lord's favor, they heard promises of God's kingdom coming at last—finally replacing the Romans and other oppressive powers. And when Jesus concluded by saying, "Today this has been fulfilled in your hearing," they knew he wasn't speaking metaphorically. They knew "today" meant "today"—now, at long last, at this moment. And they were excited—amazed—and whispered to one another, "Will you listen to this young man, this son of Joseph?!"

Now, that's as much of the passage as we're going to look at in this service. In the second service I'm going to talk more about what comes next in this story. Because soon after Jesus read from Isaiah and let everyone know that those old prophecies had come true at last, they began picturing what it's all means for them—what Jesus is

going to do for them—how this local-boy-made-good is going to help his hometown friends. And when Jesus doesn't immediately offer that type of collusion, insider-trading, Messiah "special offers" to them, the crowd turns on him. They grow angry when he reminds them that God's grace is for all people, Jew and Gentile, insiders and outsiders. They shout him down; they push him out, and try to kill him by throwing him off a cliff.

So circle back to where I started in this sermon. A word or phrase can set the tone for an entire book. In this case, a prophecy from Isaiah captures the plot of the entire gospel of Luke. So how is it possible that words about good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to all oppressed can provoke such a violent reaction—shouts and attempts to throw Jesus over a cliff? How can a ministry of healing and beatitudes and merciful love provoke a mob later to shout "Crucify him" and lead Roman centurions to nail Jesus to a tree?

Our sermon theme this month is Transformations. Well, transformations work both ways: from bad to good or from good to bad. We need to be honest about that fact, especially as Christians who worship a crucified Savior. Proclaiming release to the captives will sound great to the captives, but likely not be heard as favorably by the captors—by the jailers with their keys—by the for-profit prison industry that has made sure America has the highest number of people behind bars in the world. Proclaiming good news to the poor is great if it means people are able to move out of poverty, able to get out from modern debtor's prisons and get health care they can afford and work jobs that pay a living wage. But that isn't such good news to those who benefit from others' poor credit ratings, others' inflated medical costs, others' temp jobs and adjunct professorships and minimum wage-no benefits employment. And let's face it: you can't let the oppressed go free unless the oppressors let go of the chains—surrender their perks of white privilege—and quit accepting a status quo stacked against competing on an even-playing field.

Something about Jesus' message leads to real transformation—and transformation can lead to both something better or something worse. This gospel of Christ's is designed to provoke, to unsettle and to inspire, to enlighten. It does all of that—and if we live out this gospel, we need to anticipate all those reactions. But here's what we also need to hold onto: This good news of Jesus is true. Really true. Jesus stood up that day in the synagogue, found his place in the scroll, took a deep breath, and said "*Today this has come true. This good news is real. The Kingdom of God is in your midst. Now is the time of the Lord's favor.*" Christ has shown us what we are to do—to love God and love our neighbor. This may lead us to places of shadows, even of crosses. But it invariably leads to an empty tomb, to an Easter resurrection, and to a promise of life abundant, life eternal. Let the gospel story set the tone for the rest of your life. Trust in this transforming grace and go, follow the son of Joseph, the Son of God.