

Sermon on Luke 4:14-21
Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 24, 2010
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

About 25 years ago, when I was a new student at Luther Seminary, I was invited back by the pastor of my home church (Oak Grove Lutheran in Richfield, Minnesota) to preach a sermon during Lent. I had never preached there before (in fact, I think it was my very first sermon!). I had been confirmed there as a teenager, been active in the youth group, played guitar and sang with the youth choir, but I had never been a leader, teacher, or preacher there. In fact, I had kind of disappeared from the congregation during and after my college years, worshipped at other churches, even led choirs in other congregations, but it had been about 10 years since I had graduated and left. So I guess I was a “son of the congregation” now returning home to preach. I had the feeling, as I nervously entered the pulpit (in a new sanctuary, built after I had left), that a number of the people of my parents’ generation were looking upon me as a long-lost son now come home, and young adults of my age were now “checking me out” to hear what I would say. Would I be as radical as I had been in the late 60s, early 70s? I had shaved my beard, but still had long hair, so what was I going to say?

I actually don’t remember anything that I said that evening, or what the text was for preaching. I guess it must have gone alright, because I wasn’t thrown out of the church, nothing was thrown at me, and I continued in seminary! (Too bad – I think I missed an opportunity to rile up the home crowd!) Seriously, I think I remember the pastor being polite, saying he was pleased and happy to see me on the path to ordination. My parents may have been proud, after a few nervous moments. Maybe even someone spoke well of me, like they did about Jesus when he came home to preach in Nazareth after his ministry had begun. Like many Minnesota Lutherans would say in their most generous compliments, “Well, it could have been a lot worse!” Thank you very much!

Fast forward to last year. A young man from Chicago leaves home to embark on a political campaign that results in a run for the presidency, and victory in the fall of 2008. Beyond anyone’s wildest expectations, he wins the race, and comes home a president-elect. The night of the election, most of us remember the crowd of many thousands gathered in Grant Park, the public square in Chicago close to Lake Michigan, when Barack and Michelle Obama (and their daughters) came home to address the crowd, some weeping with joy and jubilation. I imagine there was some of that same feeling in the crowd of a returning son who has done well coming home victorious. I think most everyone spoke well of our new young president and his family that night. Again, perhaps like Jesus coming home to

Nazareth to speak. That night, and in the state of the Union address he gave a few months later, President Obama outlined his vision of hopefulness for a new generation in America, summarized by the phrase, “Yes, we can!”

Well, a year has passed since those heady days, and not everyone is still speaking well about our President. It’s inevitable, of course! No president ever retains for long the same support they had the day they were elected. For as soon as any decisions or appointments are made, the second-guessers and the nay-sayers start to speak. When the rubber hits the road with actual policies and legislation, the opposition begins. That’s just life, whether it’s in the Church or in the public arena. “The devil’s in the details” is not a verse from scripture: it’s a fact of public life, when people who may disagree come together to make things happen. That’s what our new President has come to learn, and so did Jesus – in fact, that’s what every one of us experience whenever we have a new idea at work, at school, in church, or even at home with our families and relatives! It might sound good at first, and everyone may sound like they like it, but wait till everybody finds out what those good things really mean! Good vibes can turn bad awfully fast!

That’s what Jesus soon learned after he finished preaching his first sermon in Nazareth, his hometown, with the people who had known him from birth. When they heard the challenge in his words to the way they believed the world works, they soon became furious and were ready to take him to the edge of town and throw him off a cliff! But that’s a sermon for next Sunday, in the verses that follow today’s gospel passage. Right now, I want to remind you of the “good stuff”, the encouraging words that Jesus said which made everyone speak well of him. Because it all sounded good to everybodyat first!

Jesus had come home after preaching good news throughout Galilee. Word had spread throughout the region about him. And now Jesus came home to Nazareth, where he summarized the message he was preaching by quoting from the prophet Isaiah:

“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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to him, “Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

In a way, this passage is similar to the one from Nehemiah in the Old Testament, our first reading, when the exiled people of Israel had returned home to rebuild Jerusalem . On that day Nehemiah gathered the people of Jerusalem in the public square, inside the city walls that they had just rebuilt. They called up the scribe Ezra to read from the Torah, the book of the Law of Moses, and to explain

the meaning of the word to them. At first the people wept, because of their long years of exile, and how they had forsaken the Lord. Ezra declared a “holy day”, a “Day of Jubilee”, and to weep no more, but celebrate with joy in the strength of the Lord. For the Word of God, the Law of the Lord was a gift from God, which would hold them together as a people, to lead and guide them into the future.

So, like Ezra had long ago, Jesus now was handed the scroll containing the Word of God – but this time Jesus read words from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus declared the good news of the Lord directed especially for *the poor*, contained in the words of release, recovery, and freedom that God’s Word brings. For God had anointed him to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. When he said that today this scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing, Jesus meant that NOW was the time for these things to begin to happen, in their lifetime, and he would show them how! From then on Jesus would go out to bring healing to the sick, sight to the blind, and food for the hungry by his miracles of power through the Holy Spirit. He healed lepers who were oppressed by being removed from the community, release those held captive and possessed by demons, and forgave the sins of those who were considered outcasts, ate with sinners and welcomed strangers into his circle of disciples.

The specifics of Jesus’ words later were seen as a threat to some, for whom the present order of things was beneficial. Setting free captives could be dangerous, and being so free with forgiveness and grace was unthinkable to some. So the question for us today is this: how do we receive these words from Jesus. Every Sunday we hear them and say, “Praise to you, O Christ!” Jesus preached good news, and we’re all for it! We wonder why the Pharisees, priests and scribes couldn’t hear the grace in his words, and instead plotted his death. Next week we’ll hear how angry the people in Nazareth became when Jesus challenged their view of the world, but for today, let’s end with how we react to the powerful words that Jesus proclaims for us and our world. Jesus came to challenge us in the Church to accept the marginalized in our society, to share God’s good news with those who are poor and hungry, captive or blind, and not just keep it to ourselves!

So what exactly does it mean for us to respond faithfully to Jesus’ words, and follow him as disciples? Does this mean working for racial and economic justice in our community and state, release for some now held in captivity, welcome for undocumented immigrants and strangers among us? In ancient Israel a day of jubilee meant forgiveness of all debts (not just sins). So can you and I imagine a world where debts of the poor are cancelled, foreclosures on home mortgages are erased, and human beings who are oppressed by the weight of poverty are released and returned to wholeness? How could we, the Church, be a part of making this happen? Do we dare to move beyond our old views of the way

things are, and become God's new creation, the Body of Christ, reaching out to the whole world with grace, mercy, and love - with and justice for all?

It appears, in Luke's gospel at least, that Jesus is challenging those who follow him to do exactly that: to preach good news to the poor around us, and to proclaim a new time of God's favor. Luke is not like John, where Jesus speaks mostly in symbols. Luke literally means the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. So our task is to figure out how we as God's faithful can open our eyes and hearts and minds to those who have been oppressed, the outcasts around and among us, and declare freedom and welcome for everyone. It means that some things are going to have to change, particularly the way WE see others, and how things are in OUR world. We might not have full agreement about that in the Church, and it might raise a little tension, even among those who love Jesus!

But if you and I are going to take Jesus's words seriously, maybe that's that way it has to be! As someone once said about the preaching task, it is "to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable!" So we ask God today to give us all faith and wisdom, and the strength of the Spirit, so that we can have the courage to respond to Jesus' call and proclaim the real good news of love for our neighbor.