

“Jesus & Good News”
Isaiah 61:1-3; Romans 7:4-6;
Luke 4:14-21

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“He was led by the power of the Spirit.” That’s the way this particular passage begins as Jesus came back to Galilee and began to teach in the synagogues. Then, when he is in the synagogue in Nazareth, he is given the scroll of Isaiah, the book of Isaiah, and he opens to the passage and begins to read: “The spirit of God is upon me...”

I have always had a little trouble with understanding the role of the Spirit. I think I grew up in a time when there really wasn’t much talk about Spirit. It was mostly about what we knew. In church, we acknowledged that there were three persons to the Trinity. We had a Holy Ghost, not a Spirit. Maybe some of you remember that.

So when I went off to seminary and people were talking about spirituality, I was a little worried about that. I didn’t quite know what it meant or why somebody would be so focused on it. I had two problems with it. One was the problem of growing up without a sense of what the Spirit was really all about. The second was that I had been around the world once and had seen some real poverty and some real struggles and some real needs that needed to be addressed. I was afraid they were just spiritualizing these problems away. So I struggled with what it meant.

As I read this passage again, it reminded me of that kind of struggle because here we have Jesus coming under the power of the Spirit, saying, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me.” What does it mean when the spirit of the Lord is working in Jesus? What does he announce? That’s interesting, because what he seems to announce is that it’s good news for the poor, and release for the captives, and sight for the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. Somehow that idea of spirit and the idea of setting people free came together in him at that moment.

I began to wonder, looking at those words, what is it first of all to be poor? The definition that I found in my Greek lexicon for that was simply to be dependent on others, and then it went on to say it could be valueless, worthless. Interesting adjectives to think about in terms of the relationship to being poor.

Then, the idea of being captive. I don’t think we tend to worry too much about really being captive today. At least most of us feel pretty safe walking around and don’t feel like there are any Romans around, for example, who are going to take us captive and make us do something. But in Jesus’ day, that was a real possibility. They knew what it meant to be a captive.

Or to be blind. In the Isaiah passage that he’s quoting, the way we hear it is brokenhearted, so there’s something about blindness that relates to being

brokenhearted. One of the things that both of them point to is a way of understanding that has been dashed or truncated.

Letting the oppressed go free. What does it mean to be oppressed? It is fascinating to me that the Greek word for oppression means a broken pot, one that is all broken apart. So it feels to me like the opposite of oppression is to be whole, not broken apart.

Jesus is talking about these things, and then he goes on to talk about the acceptable day of the Lord, which probably points back to the idea of Jubilee, of erasing debts.

There are a couple of things I think about when I think about all this. It looks to me like if all that happened, wow, it would be heaven. We almost tend to say it will happen in heaven, and that's the idea, that Jesus is opening us up to that possibility that these things will come in heaven. Except then he teaches us a prayer that says, "Father, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." He is opening us to the idea that this is God's will: that the poor have good news, that the captives are released, that the blind see, that the oppressed go free or, you might say, the broken are made whole. God doesn't want to see people impoverished.

We could simply look at this list as a spiritual impoverishment. But God is talking about our lives, the real experiences we have. God doesn't want people impoverished. God doesn't want people captive. God doesn't want people's vision truncated. God wants whole people. It's an invitation. I think what Jesus is doing as he says all this, is saying, "This is what God wants. This is what I'm about. This is why I'm here, and that why it's fulfilled now in your hearing."

I struggle, of course, with the fact that it has not all happened. There are a couple of things to think about with that. One is that Jesus is beginning his ministry. He's announcing this. This is where he wants to go. It's kind of like that moment in the *Wizard of Oz* when Toto goes and pulls the curtain back. I think that's this moment at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. He's pulling the curtain back on what God wants of us.

That idea of Jubilee that he ends with is the idea that back in Deuteronomy and Leviticus it says there will be a time when all the debts are wiped out and you can start over. Everybody can start over on a level playing field. It's interesting, then, that he has us pray this prayer that says, "Lord, forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Jesus is asking us to try to make it a level playing field. He's saying God will make it a level playing field with us through him, and we can pray for that, and that we can also make it a level playing field with each other. I think what he's saying here is that when we begin to make distinctions, when we begin to make some people less than others in some way or other, we are making some poor. We're making some captives. We're making some people who can't see as well. We're making some people who aren't as whole as others.

He's inviting us to see the one that wants to lead us to heaven and begin it now; that is, do the will of God on earth as it is in heaven. How do we do that? It feels to me like

we look back at what is happening to him. The power of the Spirit, the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. Or Paul, who says, "Live in the new life of the Spirit." By depending on the grace of God in our own lives, we can begin to not have to be the one who is better than somebody else, the one who has to downgrade somebody else in order to be better. We can be the one who can begin to look at the value of somebody else who doesn't see their own value, or who society doesn't value. We can begin to see what helps release somebody else because we know what releases us—the love and grace of God. It's a powerful thing, and where would we be without it?

God wants us to be people who are not impoverished, who are not captive, who are not having our vision truncated, and who are not partial, but whole. He invites us to try to live together in that way. God is inviting us to live in cooperation and collaboration, serving one another. No one person serving everyone else. No one group serving everyone else.

When Jesus says this, it's enough to take us aback—at least it does me. But there's also great hope because we can know both sides of this. We can know the ways we might impoverish somebody else and we can know how we have been impoverished. We can know how we take somebody else captive and we can know when we've been released. We can know when our vision is truncated and we can know when we help someone with their own vision. We can know when we've when we've helped take somebody apart and when we've helped put another back together. We can know that being put back together is what God does for us.

God lets us know we're valued. God lets us know we really are not captive of anyone because we have his love. God lets us know that we need not think we're blind because we have one who sees. We can know that our wholeness is developing as we follow Christ.

Jesus begins and invites us to come and to live the new life of the Spirit. Amen.