

“Good News for All”  
Luke 4:14-28  
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Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘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 them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. The crowd said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’ He said to them, ‘Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, “Doctor, cure yourself!” And you will say, “Do here also in your home town the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.”’ And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when

the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.’ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

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This year we’ve been focusing on 40 stories that tell us who (and whose) we are. We’ve explored countless stories, starting with creation and Adam and Eve, God’s covenant with Abraham, Joseph’s betrayal into Egypt, Moses leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, the rise of the kings, including David, in his glory and his failings, through the prophets and the birth of Jesus.

If all we were doing is learning Bible stories, it would be nice, but it would miss the point. A wise teacher once said that reading the Bible requires us to ask three questions: *When* does this apply? *Where* does this apply? And *what does this mean for me?* That’s how we start seeing how the Scripture not as an ancient book from far away, but the living word of God - stories that come alive in our daily lives.

And it strikes me that these three questions – “When does this apply? Where does this apply? And what does this mean for me?” – are *exactly* how Jesus approaches the Bible text in this scene in his synagogue. Jesus has been traveling around Galilee, teaching in the synagogues– not as a trained rabbi, but as a *darshanim*, which means “speaker” or “teller.” Essentially, this would be like a liturgist who is invited to read and comment on the Biblical text. So

when Jesus heads to his synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, he is the *darshanim* for the day. A synagogue leader hands him the scroll, he finds the place where the reading from the prior week left off, and he reads 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 then he makes his first comment about the reading: “Today,” Jesus says, “this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus answers the question, “when does this apply?” by answering *now*. Right now. Not back in some gloried past; not in some unknown future; but now.<sup>1</sup>

I love what scholar Diana Butler Bass says about his listeners’ shock – as if Jesus said this to *us*:

Now? Today? Today the poor hear good news, prisoners are released, the blind see, the oppressed receive justice? ... Have you been watching the news, Jesus? Are you aware of how horrible things are? That there is more inequality than ever, more people in prison unjustly, more illness of all sorts, more violence and terrorism than our ancestors ever knew? This now--today--is the kingdom of God?

But that’s exactly what Jesus says. NOW is the time. NOW is the day that God is in our midst: with hope for the poor, release for those bound by prison or

addiction, sight for those who are blind to the beauty of the earth, freedom for those who are oppressed by circumstance or fear. When does Isaiah's prophecy apply? NOW, he tells us. Now, in this moment, in our midst. That's the first question Jesus answers. And we can feel the hope his neighbors express as they speak in amazement at these gracious, hopeful words he says.

But that's not the only question, is it? The second question is also crucial: *Where* does this apply? And this time, the crowd *isn't* pleased with his answer. This is what Jesus tells them: "You want the answer to be HERE. You want me to heal here at home. But that's not what will happen. Instead, I'm following the way of the prophet Elijah, who fed strangers instead of starving widows at home ... I'm following the way of the prophet Elisha, who healed foreigners instead of healing the lepers at home." Needless to say, Jesus' message doesn't go over well with his audience. In fact, Scripture tells us, the whole congregation is filled with rage – so enraged that they try to throw him off a cliff.

And I get their reaction. Can you imagine if I got up here and said, "I'm sorry, as much as I love you, I'm off to serve Muslim refugees from Syria because God cares more about them than about you and your problems. And I'm sorry, but all of our pastoral staff? We're not here for you. We're here to tend to the hungry and homeless in North Chicago, and the students across the street at Lake Forest College. And I'm sorry, but all of our stewardship dollars? They're not going to serve your growth; they're all going to evangelism, to reach people who don't darken the door of our church. You faithful people are just going to have to fend for yourselves." Where will the promises of God take place? Where does the good news of the prophet unfold? Instead of saying, HERE, RIGHT HERE; Jesus *seems* to be saying the

opposite! It's as if he answers "where does this apply" by saying "ANYWHERE BUT HERE!"

And you know what? I can understand how Jesus' audience heard him that way. But honestly, I don't think that's what Jesus is really saying. Instead, I think he's saying this: the Spirit *is* in our midst, right here, right now. *But the Spirit isn't stuck here*, behind our church doors. Instead, the Spirit is very deliberately, very intentionally propelling us *out*, propelling us into the streets to help transform this world.

And that, I believe, is how Jesus is answering the third crucial question of Scripture: *What does this mean for me, for us, for our lives?* It means that the Holy Spirit is alive and well, doing what the Spirit has always done.

The same Spirit who spoke to Moses and David in their calling to free the people - that same Spirit is propelling us out into the world, calling us to go and create a people who are loving and just; to go create a nation that has the compassion of God in its midst. That same Spirit who spoke to Isaiah with the promise of hope – that Spirit is speaking to us, saying, "Don't give up. The Lord isn't done with this world yet, as grim as it may seem. The Lord isn't done with *your* life yet, whatever problems you are facing."

And the same Spirit who spoke to Jesus at his baptism, who called him "Beloved" – that same Spirit is speaking to us, saying, "Beloved, I need you now – I need you to tend to one another, I need you to go and love your neighbor who's different than you, I need you to care for the world that God so loves."

And the same Spirit who spoke to Jesus' neighbors and friends through him that Sabbath morning in Nazareth – that same Spirit is speaking to us, right here, right now, saying, “Don't worry so much; don't be so afraid about the state of the church, or the ordinary stresses of daily life. I love you, and I will care for you, but trust me. I will be there for you wherever you go, to the ends of the earth. Trust me. Please. Trust me the way that I am trusting you.” The way that I am putting all of this in your hands. The hope that I have for this world.

This is Jesus' first teaching in the Gospel. Doesn't it capture his central message of the good news of the Gospel for the rest of his days? There's nowhere that's exempt from the love of God in Jesus Christ. There's no corner of the world where the poor can't be fed. There's no prison of the heart where the lonely aren't embraced. There's no slavery to addiction, no slavery to poverty, no slavery to fear, no slavery to money that will not be freed by God's power. And I am convinced that God is calling us right here, and right now, to roll up our sleeves and go out into the world and help to make it happen.

I love the way Diana Butler Bass says it. She says of Isaiah's prophecy, the Scripture Jesus read that day, He could have read it this way to them and to us:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us* (~~and therefore also with you~~),  
 because he has anointed *us*  
 to bring good news to the poor.  
 He has sent *us* to proclaim release to the captives  
 and he has sent *us* to recover sight to the blind,  
 he has sent *us* to let the oppressed go free,

he has sent *us* to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”<sup>ii</sup>

This I believe. The year of the Lord’s favor. It starts *now*. Good news to the poor and release to the captives. It starts *here*. Recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. It starts *with us* – with any who will hear Christ’s call to be his disciples to be sent out into the world. As Jesus later said to his disciples, “Those who have ears to hear ... let them hear.”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we ask that your Spirit would speak to us this day. Lord, speak to us, that we may speak in living echoes of your voice. And be with us that we might be your hands and feet to love this world. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Diana Butler Bass, “The Power of Today,” Day1, January 24, 2016; [http://day1.org/7044-the\\_power\\_of\\_today](http://day1.org/7044-the_power_of_today)

<sup>ii</sup> Butler Bass