

The Next Revolution

Isaiah 4: 1 – 5

Pastor HeyYoung and I are beginning a summer series of messages today which we're calling "**First Things**". It's a loosely connected look at a number of 'firsts' in the Scripture – which I suspect will lead to some interesting connections for us as the summer goes on. Because that's the way the Spirit often works, isn't it?

Since this is the first message in this series, I thought it made sense to begin by taking a look at the first 'sermon' of Jesus. This is a very important message, as it sets the standard for *everything* else that Jesus did, and just as importantly, for everything that he expected his followers to do as well. (Which, I pray, includes all of *us*.)

Jesus stood up in his local synagogue, a young man – perhaps just 30 years old, or so. He certainly must have been known by those who were in attendance that day; after all, he was in his home town. And while we know virtually nothing of his life up until that point, mostly just the Christmas narratives – which I doubt any of the people in that synagogue had heard about – we can use our common sense, and conclude that Jesus was respected, and well liked. He was a good man, son of Joseph (who may died by this point). He was the oldest sibling in his family, and without a doubt, he took care of his responsibilities in that regard.

So here we are, an ordinary man, on an ordinary Sabbath, in an ordinary time. Until this moment. This day it was Jesus' turn to read Scripture in the synagogue service. And he turned to the scroll of Isaiah, chapter 61, where he quoted these words, recorded in Luke 4 –

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind,
To set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

Beautiful words, and no doubt familiar words to those who were hearing them on that day. But no one was prepared for what Jesus said next. This was his first recorded sermon, the message that changed the world. He had been teaching in the synagogues before this, but this was the message that thrust him into the public spotlight. And it was only eight words!

“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

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This passage that had been read, discussed, spiritualized, ignored, questioned, (and all the stuff we do with Scripture that we don't completely understand) suddenly becomes *alive*. *Today* this Scripture is fulfilled in *your* hearing... and implied by the first line, "It is fulfilled in *me*."

The Hebrew word 'Messiah' means 'the anointed one'. Jesus begins his public ministry by claiming the authority of God on his life, his words, his actions. He says, "I am the Messiah." It's not long before he is challenging people to follow him. To *follow* him. To *do what he does*, to not simply 'believe', not just to be convinced that he was who he said he was, but to demonstrate that belief by taking up his priorities, his values, his way of doing things.

And he states what those values and priorities are, right from the start, right from this first scripture reading.

[The Spirit of the Lord] *has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.*

Add to that, *freedom* for the prisoners, *sight* for the blind, *freedom* for the oppressed, and to tell everyone the good news of God's Grace (the year of the Lord's favor has arrived!) And, again, he says, "This all starts *today*."

It is a tragedy that in the church wars of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, an assumption arose (that I am dismayed to admit that I didn't have the wisdom to see through this in my younger years) that it was necessary to choose which 'side' you were going to be on: were you a 'liberal', a 'social gospel proponent', or, were you a 'Bible believing conservative' who *preached the word*? You had to choose, even though the answer was always *I'm both!*

The result of those wars, I believe, is the general state of the Church today... divided, disrespected by our culture, suspect, and largely ineffective in doing anything to make a real, positive impact on our world. See, in forcing people, congregations, seminaries and denominations to choose sides (or, trying to do that) we gutted the good News of Jesus Christ by either making it into a social action campaign divorced from any real spiritual power, or (maybe worse) by turning Christ followers into people whose only real interest is in some *other* place

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‘out there’ somewhere. There is no need to ‘do stuff’ here – that’s the government’s job, and the world is going to hell anyway. Our task is to preach and ‘get decisions’.

But both sides seem to have forgotten Jesus’ first sermon, where he says that in the power of *the Spirit*, things are going to change – right here, on this earth, right now... TODAY this Scripture is fulfilled. These things happen when Jesus’ disciples understand what it really means to follow in the steps of Christ. These things happen when we in the church come to the realization that this Christian life is not about ‘getting somewhere else someday’ Besides being contrary to the words of Jesus, that puts all the focus of our faith on *us*! It makes it about us, which is the opposite of what Jesus talked about! When we have a paradigm shifting experience with the Risen Lord and start to *get it*, the result is that the world is changed.

The problem is that the premise of that argument is wrong. It is a false dichotomy. It is not one over the other. It is not an either or proposition. We come to eternal life through faith in Christ’s work on the cross. Acceptance of this free gift that pays the penalty for our sin is all that is required to be in full relationship with God the Father...nothing more. But that relationship has always been about our transformation into those who do the work of the Father here on *earth as it is done in heaven*. Here and now in this place.

Jesus’ first sermon sets the compass course for us as to what the work of the Church is to be about. We who have the bold audacity to call ourselves Christians—Jesus followers—the living Body of Christ on earth are called to carry on the ministry of Jesus. Jesus who said that in the power of the Spirit, things are going to change – right here, on this earth, right now – Today this Scripture is fulfilled!

Following Christ is a life altering decision to put ourselves aside, to follow the radical commands of Christ, to *stop* living for ourselves, for our own honor, and recognition, to break away from the standards of life and success that have been taught to us and stamped onto our deepest subconscious minds by our culture and which also are so deeply embedded in the church. (You know what kind of values I’m talking about – that success is measured by money, or influence; that the greatest people are those with the most power, or the most recognition by their peers...

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or that the ones with the best ‘numbers’ *win* –whatever those numbers represent. That possessions demonstrate God’s blessing... these are the values of the world. But, my, how they have seeped into the church.)

When I was younger and immature in my faith and understanding of what Jesus was about, I heard people spiritualize Jesus’ first sermon so frequently that I just accepted it – that ‘the poor’ were simply the people who hadn’t heard about this new way to heaven. The ‘oppressed’ are those with spiritual issues that we can help them get over (by preaching to them). ‘Blind’ and ‘Deaf’ are *spiritual* euphemisms... not referring to real physical needs.

But I was the blind one. Jesus, later in the Gospel of Matthew, lists what we might call the ‘action items’ to go along with his sermon. He’s telling his followers what we need to be about. See if you recognize this scripture text:

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat... thirsty and you gave me something to drink... I was a stranger and you invited me in; I needed clothes and you clothed me... I was sick and you looked after me... I was in prison and you came to visit me (Matthew 25: 35 – 45)

What does Jesus say to those who did these things (even when they didn’t even realize that they were doing it to *him*)? He says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world!” (Matthew 25: 34) In other words, “You did it *right!* This is what I want from you!”

Jesus was talking about real people... poor people. People with needs. The marginalized. The forgotten ones. The ones no one else wants or sees. As Mike Slaughter (and others) often say, “If it isn’t helping the poor then it isn’t the Gospel.” You can’t miss that if you read the Scriptures with an open mind!

In Jesus’ parable of the great feast, when those who were first invited come up with their excuses as to why they can’t (won’t) come, Jesus says to his servants, Then go out into the highways and the byways and invite ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame’. My house will be filled.

In Luke chapter 3, just one chapter before this one we are looking at today, John the Baptist is

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asked by the crowds who have come out to hear him and to receive his baptism, “What then should we do?” He responds with “*Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.*”

When John the Baptist sends messengers to Jesus to ask him if he’s the one or should they expect someone else, Jesus doesn’t respond with a doctrinal discourse. He says, “Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the Good News is preached *to the poor.*” When you start to look for this in the Gospels, it is everywhere. It is ‘Kingdom of God’ stuff!

So what does this mean for us in the church today—we who make the bold claim that we are the Living Body of Christ on earth?

Well, the answer to that question is obvious, isn’t it? We do what Jesus did. We continue the work that he began. We share his love with everyone – but particularly remembering the same people that Jesus focused on when he walked this earth.

A couple of weeks ago, on Pentecost, I shared a message with you based on the Old Testament passage about the ‘spies’ who were sent into the Promised Land. Remember the story? They came back and said, “Oh, its just like God said it would be – flowing with milk and honey!” And then they started listing the ‘buts’ – “But the cities are huge, and fortified...” and “the people are giants!” - all the reasons why it would be better to simply stay in the desert, even though they *knew* this wasn’t God’s plan for them.

I shared with you as openly as I could the impression that I brought home from Annual Conference – i.e., that because of the way that I believe you ‘get’ what I’m talking about here today, that we are in a unique position of being able to see into the Promised Land as we’re challenged by some congregations who are further along this road than we are. We are close enough to not be discouraged, but inspired by these churches.

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And I said that I believe that God is calling us into something more. A level of commitment where most of our congregation understand that none of have been called to sit on the sidelines and watch what God is doing. We've all been called to roll up our sleeves, to die to ourselves, to pick up the Cross (all these different ways that Jesus talked about following him... well, except 'rolling up the sleeves'; that's mine!) We've been called to get to work. All of us!

I got so many positive responses to that message that I'm really excited about where God is going to take us. Some of you started coming up with specific ideas, some simply said, "I'm ready", or "Count me in!"

I mentioned in that message that I didn't know where this was going to take us. Let me clarify that for you, if I can. That wasn't meant to be a statement of my own personal confusion as to the direction I'd like to lead this church. But rather, it was a statement of recognizing that it is the Holy Spirit who will ultimately lead us, not me; not Pastor HeyYoung. Not Mike Slaughter (in *absentia*!)

We have come this far, because creative and spirit-filled people in this community of faith have heard God's call, and have responded. So many of our ministries – particularly our newest ministries – have been lay-led and lay *envisioned*. Divorce Care, DC4K, Grounds for Good (Coffeeshouse) and others. In fact, the *expansion* of pretty much *everything* we do here is led by lay people – by you.

My job is to help 'create the environment' that will give permission to you to follow the leading of the Spirit. I've believed that since I came here 17+ years ago as a green and nervous associate Pastor. I believed that – and had a little more clout in making it happen when I became your Senior Pastor 7 years (and one week!) ago. And I am thrilled to see how you are understanding this vision of what the church is meant to be... and how now you are 'running with it.'

We have recently been the beneficiaries of a wonderful (and frightening) bequest from one of our members who went to be with the Lord about 3 years ago. I'm not going to get into all that now, because we're going to explain this to you more fully at another time. But, in putting

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together the *ad hoc* committee that recommended how to use this bequest for the glory of God, it was very important to me that we were very careful that these funds not be relied on to do the everyday work of the church. That's why we give, giving is a way that we maintain spiritual health. We're designating funds toward some important capitol projects that will help us greatly with our energy bills, building security, and some important things like this. But, in a unanimous vote of our Church Conference last week, we also decided to set aside one tenth of the gift (a tithe)- \$46,000 that will go into a 'hurting world fund'.

This fund is not intended to replace the Pastor's Discretionary fund, but is intended to be used for *ministry*. Pastor HY and I will be the administrators. These are available funds to use as start up funds for a number of new outreaches, and ministries into our community. It was an amazing stroke of timing, and a wonderful and faithful decision by our Church Conference.

You see, what I am talking about here is not hypothetical. This isn't just a sermon to fill time on a Saturday night or Sunday morning. It certainly is not for your entertainment. This is real world, life changing, and world changing stuff that God is calling US to get involved with.

Again, I really think for the most part this church gets this. Your giving on Saturdays/ Sunday mornings and in the Communion offerings has freed us to respond to many situations in our community. We have blessed people in the name of Jesus Christ, in ways that you will probably never know this side of heaven, but you've been part of something wonderful. That will continue.

As the economy continues to crumble around us and the federal and state governments continue to cut back on the resources for the poor and the working poor, its up to the church to do even more. As the church becomes more and more irrelevant to younger people in our country (from *their* perspective) we need to find ways to get out beyond these walls and get into the community... and show them who Christ Jesus is. We need to *go* and share a Love that not only is *relevant* but is Central to us all.

We must remember...this is Jesus stuff...this is why we do what we do. This is the

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course and direction that Jesus set in his very first sermon. And with the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to carry on His ministry here and now. On this weekend that we celebrate the American Revolution; perhaps the time has come for a second revolution: a Revolution of Love in Action. A revolution in our understand of what the Church is here for and who we are – recognizing that Church is a *verb* and not just a noun! A revolution of commitment to something bigger than ourselves. May God be praised in our response to him.

AMEN