

“God Speaks Through the Prophets”

January 24, 2016

Work of God Speak series – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

The campaigning has begun. The race for president has been and continues to be front-page news. The Iowa Caucus is coming up, and we’ll continue to hear about polling numbers. Candidates are laying their platforms – explaining their credentials and angles, talking about what needs to be changed and what they’ll do about it.

I thought of our national situation as I read the passage from Luke. I’m not equating Jesus to any political candidate – let me be clear – but what happens in Luke has a similar purpose.

Driven by the Holy Spirit, Jesus has just spent a time in the wilderness all alone. He experienced temptation from the Devil, and now he returns, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, to do what God calls him to do on earth. But what is that exactly?

Jesus goes to Galilee, and his reputation as a teacher spreads quickly. Then he goes to Nazareth, his hometown, to make his intentions clear. He goes to worship as usual, but what he does there is unexpected. It isn’t so much the reading from Isaiah 61 that gets the people, though the words are powerful, but it’s what he says after. He tells them that what he just read has been fulfilled – he’s the one who will do all that God has promised because the Holy Spirit empowers him to do it.

Take a look at this CARTOON:



How does God speak through the prophets and now through Jesus? The magi – some of his first visitors as a child – reveal that Jesus is Messiah for all nations. At his baptism, Jesus is named as “beloved Son” and affirmed by God’s grace. When he goes to a wedding, his power is demonstrated in his first public miracle of turning water into wine. His disciples witness it and trust him.

In the revelation of who Jesus is in Scripture, there's always this holding together of him as Son of God – divine – and one who is fully human. We encounter him in everyday life – at home when the magi come, at the Jordan River along with others who come to be baptized, at a wedding with other guests, and here in Luke going to worship at the synagogue (as was his custom, it says).

But when Jesus reads from Isaiah 61, we remember who he is. Jesus' purpose and calling become clearer when he claims his identity as Messiah. He is sent by God to fulfill God's promises of forgiveness, redemption, and reconciliation.

And we claim what he says for ourselves. In his mission, we find our purpose and calling to serve God and one another. If we're seeking to be disciples of Jesus Christ, this is our job description, too. He lays out his vision and how he will lead in bringing the Kingdom of God.

First, he is working in the power of the Spirit. He is anointed with the Spirit – remember his baptism – to preach and heal to meet human need. Driven by the Holy Spirit, Jesus has just spent a time in the wilderness all alone. He experienced temptation from the Devil, and now he returns and offers God's plan.

He promises liberation. He speaks of the year of the Lord's favor – a time for salvation to be proclaimed – when the Messiah was here! In Isaiah, it's a reference to the Year of Jubilee that came every 50 years. Slaves were freed, debts were canceled, and property was returned to the original family. It was a time of true liberation! Think of it – your debts canceled!

For the prophet Isaiah, the reference was the promise of liberation from captivity. The Israelites would be freed from Babylon. They would go home again.

When Jesus speaks of the year of the Lord's favor, it's also a promise of freedom. It's all about liberation. He is the Messiah who will bring redemption. He is the One who will reveal the depth of God's love for all the world – and all means all – and that will get him into trouble.

He is the One who will deliver us from sin and death! This is Good News! They have been waiting for God's blessing, and Jesus proclaims that it's here and now. No more waiting! One writer says that Jesus proclaims that the words of Isaiah "have come to life, right here, right now. In 3-D."

The Spirit of the Lord is on Jesus – remember at his baptism when the Spirit descended on him. He's already fought off temptation from the devil in the wilderness, which was only possible because the Spirit was with him. Now he says that his ministry is focused on release and recovery. Jesus calls us and challenges us to value people over politics, love over Law, and relationships over religion.

Does our walk with Christ reflect what he says? There's a powerful sense of dependence here – this understanding that we depend on God for liberation, for freedom, for redemption, for healing, for hope. That's where we start – knowing our own need for a Savior.

To admit our need for a Savior is a profound and transformative step in faith. In baptism, the gift of water cleanses us and reminds us of God's grace that is with us even before we accept it for ourselves. And yet the profound change that happens when we **do** accept it brings us into closer connection with God from our side. We want to serve God in the world. We claim God's call on our lives.

So this isn't just about other people and how we serve others; this is about us, too. Maybe we're more encumbered than we think. Jesus' words should make us think about where we've been - how we've been changed - and where we're going - how we've living out our faith.

How are we *preaching good news to the poor* (and that means "poor" in every sense of the word – not just those struggling financially, but also those who are seeking God and seeking to grow spiritually)?

How are we *proclaiming release to the captives* – setting people free by what we say and do and not holding people captive by attitudes and actions?

How are we *offering recovering of sight to the blind* – helping people see God's grace in their lives and displaying God's grace in ours – and *letting the oppressed go free* – helping others experience freedom in Christ by speaking of the freedom we know in Christ?

How do we *proclaim the year of the Lord's favor* – bring honest about our need for forgiveness and showing the transformation that Christ has brought through forgiveness of sins?

It's clear that Jesus stood for people over politics, love over Law, and relationships over religion. And it's clear that this is not passive. We cannot be passive in our faith. There's action and engagement! We have to be attentive to our own spiritual life - not going through the motions, simply sitting in worship, reading a devotional once in a while, but being engaged in Jesus' call as he lays it out here. Our witness matters!

Jesus comes to Nazareth filled with the Holy Spirit, and Jesus goes from there to fulfill this Scripture. And he calls us to follow him, so we become a fulfillment of this powerful Word, too. If we want to welcome all, if we want to be empowered by Christ, if we want to be sent forth to serve, here's where we start!

It means that we'll get dirtier, go deeper, and be more invested in the vision that Jesus lays out. Friends, we have to get messy. There's a lot to celebrate as we serve

God together. Being able to respond to the needs around us - to take shoes to kids who need them, to support families who are caring for kids in foster care, to pray for and make meals for people in need, to be on the ground at MAP handing out food, clothes, and a hot meal, and to give generously to many causes - all of that is a reason to praise God!

But we continue to search out and respond to opportunities to needs face-to-face. As we seek God's will and way for ministry, as we pray for and meet with Lakeside, our focus is to follow how God speaks to us through Jesus' call to ministry. How will we follow Jesus so that the Kingdom of God is seen and heard and felt in our Muskegon community and beyond? How will we continue to serve God so that all people will experience God's grace - so that those who are held captive will be free, those who are blind will see, those who are under oppression will be free, those who have indebtedness – those who are in sin will find forgiveness and mercy?

“A Prophet's Blessing” by Jan Richardson

This blessing finds its way behind the bars.
This blessing works its way beneath the chains.
This blessing knows its way through a broken heart.
This blessing makes a way where there is none.
Where there is no light, this blessing.
Where there is no hope, this blessing.
Where there is no peace, this blessing.
Where there is nothing left, this blessing.
In the presence of hate. In the absence of love.
In the torment of pain. In the grip of fear.
To the one in need. To the one in the cell.
To the one in the dark. To the one in despair.
Let this blessing come as bread. Let this blessing come as release.
Let this blessing come as sight. Let this blessing come as freedom.
Let this blessing come.

May we be a part of this blessing in the name of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.