

Sermon - Pastor Joshua Olson
Shepherd of the Bay Lutheran Church, Lusby

“Release Today”

Luke 4:14-21

In so many ways, this looked like just another homecoming. As Jesus walked back into Nazareth that day, there was so much that was familiar. I would imagine, every street had a story. Every face had a name. Every smell had a memory tied to it. Jesus grew up in this sleepy little town and that day he walked right to the synagogue he had been attending since he was a child. And as he entered, he encountered people who knew him just as well. I'm sure if you went around the room you could have found people who could tell you stories of how Jesus used to follow his dad around town or cling to the skirts of his mother. They could have told you where he liked to play or who he hung around with. Jesus had come home.

But it wasn't a homecoming. It was a jailbreak. Luke records, "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. 15 He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. 16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. 17 The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: 18 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." So often familiarity can hang there like a fog, hiding the truth of a situation. For many of the people there that day, all they saw was a Nazareth boy who had come home.

But Jesus looked past all of these familiar faces and places. He ignored the sense of nostalgia that comes with the familiar sounds and smells of your hometown. Peered through the fog of familiarity. He saw past appearances. He saw the truth. He looked at people who were lacking, even if they had plenty to eat. He saw people who were prisoners, even if they could come and go as they pleased. He saw people who were blind, even if they could spot a gnat from a mile away. He saw people who were broken, even if they appeared to have it all together. He saw people who needed release. And that is why he was there that day. This wasn't a homecoming, it was a jailbreak.

And as Jesus looks around the room today, he sees the exact same thing. Poverty. But a poverty that comes from lacking so much more than just money. We get glimpses of it in our discontent, our struggle to find acceptance, and our searching for meaning and fulfillment. We are missing something. And oh how we misdiagnose what that is! We try to fill the void with all sorts of things – money, success, people. But the more we do so, the more we become acutely aware of the fact that we are still missing something. That we are stuck in a poverty that goes deeper than our checkbooks.

Captivity. But not to what we think. We think of expectations that we can't meet. We think of demands upon us that pull us in different directions. We think of tyrants who command us from afar. But what really holds us captive is the sinner inside. This part of me that has such a corrupted view of life that it thinks that to rush off into sin is freedom. When in fact, it is just tightening the chains of the bondage of sin. Its true of all manner of sin - the more you indulge your sinful appetite, the more it grabs hold of you. The more you want it. Perhaps we recognize that we have a problem with temptation. And perhaps we've resolved to fix it. Maybe we made that our New Years resolution. How's that going? The more we tell ourselves to try harder, to be better, to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, to break the chains of temptation and free ourselves

to be a better me. The deeper we fall. The tighter the chains become. The more we become aware of just how captive we are to sin.

Blindness. Blindness in every direction. One moment, we think we see the truth as we convince ourselves that we've done pretty good. That God is pretty lucky to have me. That I might not be perfect, but not that far off. The next moment, we think we see the truth as we are convinced that God could never love a guy like me. That everything that happens in life happens because he's giving me exactly what I deserve. We peer like blindmen at our lives, thinking we see the way out and yet from God's point of view people who are wandering in the dark.

Broken. Shattered by the realities of life. Crushed by the consequences of our sins. Jesus doesn't see a group here today who have it all together. He knows us too well for that! He sees people who are broken. Broken by the decisions they themselves have made. Scrambling to put together the shards of their shattered life. Crushed by a sinful world that is nothing close to what God intended it to be.

Sometimes this is all we can see. The reality of this smothers us. At other times, it seems like he's talking about someone else. As if I've finally got this all figured out. But give it a moment, and it will become clear once more. This is the new normal in a sinful world. This is what Jesus saw as he walked into his hometown. Not nostalgia. Not comforting familiarity. But people in desperate need of release. This isn't a homecoming. It's a jailbreak.

But have you ever heard of a jailbreak like this? One that happens by just saying the word? Do you remember the movie "Shawshank Redemption", where Andy Dufrain spent numerous years digging through the walls of his cell, climbed into a sewage pipe, and crawled to freedom. I have no doubt that he would have rather wished to be able to talk his way out of the jail.

Listen to what Isaiah says Jesus would do, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Free because He said so. He doesn't come to Nazareth with a scheme on how to trick the devil – consider his temptation and just how straightforward Jesus is. He doesn't need deception. He just says it, and its so.

Its not that there's no action. Remember where this road would end. He emerged from the waters of his baptism to do battle with the devil in the wilderness, to enter his hometown in the power of the Holy Spirit, to go through town and village, all the way to the cross. He descended into our prison so that he could blow the doors off for you by dying in your place and mine. By paying for sin that he didn't commit so that it can't hold you anymore. This Jesus is a God of action. Who took action to free you from prison.

Today, he gives you that freedom through words. He looks at this group of sinners. And one by one he brings us to the waters of baptism and he says you are forgiven. And you are. He stands before you today. All of us confessing all of our different sins. And he just says you are forgiven. And you are. He speaks to you in his Word as you read the Bible. He preaches it to you through a messenger. He just says the word – and there in that word he connects you to all he did for you on the cross.

He just says so. In that good news, he gives you what you lack. He addresses your poverty in a way that only he can. He makes you right with God. He gives you a relationship with the one you were created to have a relationship with. He won you that relationship in his life and death for you, and today its yours because he says so. He proclaims freedom to the captives. Even though your sinful nature rages from within, he tells you that it doesn't own you any more. That you are his now. He gives you a clean record. And he empowers you to do daily battle with the devil. Free because he said so. He opens your eyes through his Word. There he shows you the truth and leads you to see life in that light. The Holy Spirit turns on the lights for you so that you can see things as they are – because he said so. Through his Word he puts you back together again. He doesn't remove all the different ways that sin has shattered your life, but he reconciles you to him. He gives you a measure of reconciliation with each other. He points you forward to a new day when all the broken shards of your life will be swept away and you'll be brand new again.

The people of his hometown got this much right – they just shut up for a minute. It says that the whole room was silent and every eye was fixed upon him. If we can learn anything from them, learn this. Just take some time and listen. With our modern ADD we are pumping information and entertainment and distractions into our eyes, mouth, and ears every moment of the day. It is so easy to just be carried away by it. But on Sunday mornings. In the morning before you head off to work. At night before you go to bed. During your commute or for those moments during the day when nobody is hustling you, just stop for a moment. Look. Listen. Jesus and the Holy Spirit marched into Galilee that day to free them from sin. And through his Word, he continues to do just that for you. And there is nothing we do to earn it, to win it, to accomplish it. Just stop. Look. And listen.

The year of the Lord's favor. How many hope that is what 2019 will show itself to be! Lost in the darkness, they see a series of random occurrences and hope that this year luck will be on their side. But your eyes have been opened. You know that good times or bad – you live in the year of the Lord's favor. No matter what you lack, you are rich in Christ. No matter what constrains you, you are free in him. No matter how thick the fog of stress and fear, you can see clearly the Savior who holds you in his hands. No matter how broken it all is, you can lay it all in his hands and he makes you whole. This is why Jesus set you free – to live in the Lord's Favor. Amen.