

Today
Luke 4:14-30
John Breon

Author Tim Dearborn and his friend David were driving across the Scottish countryside early one Sunday morning to lead the worship service in a rural church. David was a theological student with a fascinating background. He had been a shepherd for twenty years and now, in his forties, following a dramatic conversion, he was preparing to become a pastor.

As they crested a hill, the sunlight broke through onto a green pasture where dozens of sheep grazed. Tim said to David, "That must bring back many memories."

David simply said, "Tim, please stop the car."

They stopped and David asked him to back up to a place opposite the field they had passed. Then he got out, walked across the road and climbed over the stone fence. He walked to the far end of the pasture. A distressed sheep was stuck on its back and he gently shoved it upright so it could scramble away.

David later explained that unshorn sheep are so top-heavy that they can get stuck on their backs and suffocate. Unless they are set right, they'll die.

David and Tim had seen the same field. Tim had admired its pastoral beauty. David had seen the one sheep out of a hundred that was in danger. He saw the sheep with the experienced eyes of a shepherd. Tim saw them with the eyes of a lifelong city-dweller. Without David's sight and touch, the sheep would have soon died.

All around us are people whose distress we may not be able to see. Often it's carefully hidden. God wants to give us the gift of his sight, so we can stop, climb over the walls that divide us, gently touch others and help them to their feet (Tim Dearborn, *Taste and See: Awakening Our Spiritual Senses* 131, cited at *Homiletics Online*). Because that's what Jesus does.

Following his temptations in the Judean desert, Jesus returns to Galilee *in the power of the Spirit*. Luke continues his emphasis on the role of

the Holy Spirit in Jesus' life. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came upon him as he prayed at his baptism. He was filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit. Now he returns to Galilee to begin his ministry in the power of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's personal powerful presence. And the Spirit was active in Jesus' life and ministry.

Jesus enjoyed a good reputation in Galilee. As he taught in the synagogues, people spoke well of him and word about him spread all over the region.

Then Jesus went back to his hometown, Nazareth. On the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue and read the Scripture, *as was his custom*. By his faithfulness, Jesus affirms the primary elements of Jewish religious life: the synagogue, the Sabbath and the Scriptures. Jesus confronted Israel with their own Scriptures and called people to return to follow Scripture faithfully.

In the synagogues at that time, any Jewish man was allowed to read the Scripture and comment on it. Jesus takes advantage of this practice. He stands to read and chooses a text from the prophet Isaiah (61:1, 2).

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 release for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
To release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

So far, so good. This was a popular passage and people saw it describing the Messiah's work.

After rolling up the scroll, Jesus sat down. Sitting was the customary posture for teaching. He has everyone's attention. They are all looking at him intently, perhaps wondering why he chose that passage of Scripture and what this hometown boy is going to say.

The first word out of Jesus' mouth is "Today." The time has come. The age of God's kingdom is here. The promises of God are being fulfilled. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

One of the significant things about this passage is what it shows us about Jesus' self-awareness—his identity and vision for ministry.

Jesus is fulfilling prophecy. He claims to be the One who is anointed by God with the Holy Spirit. That is, he is Messiah. Jesus announces that the agenda, the mission of the Anointed One described in Isaiah is his mission, his agenda.

Another interesting thing about that word "today" is that the rest of Luke's writing in Luke-Acts shows that it is still "today." The era, the age of God's kingdom that Jesus launched continues. Jesus continues the ministry he began then. What he said then, he says to us. What he did for people then, he does for us. And if we will hear Jesus' good news and receive his ministry, we become part of that ministry. The church is anointed with the Holy Spirit to minister as Jesus did. Jesus is God's Anointed One. The Church is God's anointed community.

So the good news Jesus proclaimed is for us and it becomes our message to share. The freedom and healing and release Jesus brought are for us and we are empowered by God's Spirit to bring freedom and healing and release to others.

In the new era that Jesus ushers in, the poor receive good news, the prisoners hear a message of freedom, the blind are given sight and the oppressed are released from their oppression. Luke most likely intends us to understand these various groups literally—the economically poor, those wasting away in actual prison cells, the physically blind and the weaker, less influential people who are abused and walked on and exploited by those with more power and resources. It's anyone who lacks status in society. Jesus ministered to such people. And the church is called to join him in that ministry.

We don't want to hurry past this physical understanding of Jesus' ministry. But Luke wants us also to understand it holistically. What Jesus says here applies spiritually as well. The poor in spirit—those who know

their need, the prisoners of sin and destructive habits, the spiritually blind and oppressed also need to hear the good news and be set free.

This is all part of what the final line of the Isaiah quote refers to: "To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." This probably refers to the Year of Jubilee when Israel was to free slaves, cancel debts and restore property to its original owners. But even in the Old Testament, the ideas of the Jubilee were interpreted in terms of God's kingdom to come in the future. That interpretation continued to develop in the time after the OT writings. Now Jesus is fulfilling those expectations. His life and ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit begin a Jubilee for all people.

The people in the synagogue responded with a mixture of admiration, wonder, and doubt to Jesus' announcement that he was fulfilling the scripture. These people know Jesus, they watched him grow up, they know his family. They are pleasantly surprised at this remarkable thing he has said. Every good Jew hoped the Messiah would be born in his or her lifetime. And Jesus' statement about fulfillment appealed to this hope.

But, apparently, Jesus was aware of what these people expected of him. They had heard of the miracles he had done in Capernaum and they wanted to see the same kind of power in Nazareth. "Physician, heal yourself" was a way of saying that you should take care of your own. If Jesus was truly fulfilling prophecy, then they might expect him to do wonderful things for them.

But Jesus disappoints this expectation. He cites another proverb: "Prophets are not accepted in their hometowns." This shows their resentment that Jesus has taken God's favor to others beyond Nazareth, especially to Capernaum, which had a large non-Jewish population. Because he has taken his ministry to outsiders, Jesus is not acceptable in his hometown. He is announcing the "acceptable" year of the Lord, but he is not "acceptable" to his own people. They hear that Messiah's kingdom is near and they rejoice. Then they hear that it will not entail what they expect, and they become angry.

Jesus defends his ministry to outsiders by offering two OT stories about Elijah and Elisha. Both of those prophets ministered to non-Jews and did not do the same sort of miracles for anyone in Israel.

Hearing these familiar stories from their own Scriptures is part of what makes the Nazareth folks so angry. We often don't like to face the truth, and it's upsetting to have our cherished ideas proved wrong. It was probably offensive enough for them to be reminded that Elijah ministered to a poor Gentile woman, but it must have been intolerable for people oppressed by Roman occupation to be reminded that Elisha healed a soldier of Syria, a country that had once oppressed Israel.

In their anger, the people in the synagogue become a mob and drive Jesus out of town to kill him. This foreshadows the rejection and death that Jesus will finally face. They were ready to throw him off a cliff, but he walked through the crowd safely—maybe now experiencing the promised protection that the devil had misapplied during the wilderness temptation. This escape from the Nazareth lynch mob may foreshadow how God will rescue Jesus from the grave through resurrection.

And having passed through the mob, Jesus "went on his way"—that is, he walked the path of obedience to God's purpose fulfilling the mission he was anointed for (Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT).

This story not only tells how Jesus' hometown church reacted to him, but it also challenges us to consider our own response to Jesus. What do we make of his claims? How do we feel about the people he includes in his love and that he ministers to?

Do we welcome Jesus and join him in his mission, or do we try to shove him aside when he leads us and calls us to minister to people who aren't like us? A friend of mine recently told about being with a group of church people who kept asking, "How do we get more people? How do we get new people?" Someone started describing how they would need to change. And they said, "Oh, we don't want to change!"

Are we willing to go with Jesus wherever he leads, whatever it may cost? This scene on the cliff outside Nazareth not only foreshadows Jesus' rejection and death; it also foreshadows the fate of many of his followers.

Hearing and receiving the good news includes the responsibility of sharing the good news—with everyone. That can get dangerous, or at least uncomfortable. We can do it only if we will go with Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Maybe you're like that sheep that's stuck and can't get right. You need the touch of the Gentle Shepherd to set you right. Who do you know that's stuck like that sheep and that God may want to use you to bring his word and his touch of grace to?

Today, Jesus is here. Today, Jesus offers good news and healing and freedom. Today, Jesus invites us to respond to him. Today, Jesus calls us to join him in his mission. Today, Jesus offers the power of the Holy Spirit so we can go with him in mission to all the people he loves.