Jesus’ Ministry Begins

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This certainly has been a remarkable week to become aware of the flow of history and to ask for and watch for the hand of God in the flow of history of our day. Every inauguration of a president is a significant moment for us, as is the elevation of a new leader in any country. This one, of course, had many additional and highly significant dimensions to it. A friend of mine had tickets and invited me to accompany him to the Mall, but my own work required me to be in the area of Mobile, Alabama. My friend told me afterward that he was grateful to have gone, that the vast majority of people were of good and gracious spirit even when the flow of the crowds became difficult. He said for many people, it was very moving. The group I was with, of about one hundred folk, stopped our work to watch the events on a large screen television. It proved to be a deeply emotional experience for a group whose political viewpoints and life experiences were remarkably diverse. II Timothy 2:1 urges that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

Prayers for our president and all who lead are very much to be a part of our Christian life.

So, it is good for us to reflect on the flow of history and to be aware of the hand of God in our lives at every moment and in every turn—from the flow of the history of God’s work among us that we learn about in the Bible to the flow of history we are witnesses to every day. For the last several months, we have been studying God’s Big Story, which may be summarized, as Pastor Pete has been saying, by three huge words: creation, fall, redemption—the creation of all that exists and of humankind, the fall of humanity with our sin and the resulting separation from God and brokenness of our lives, and the redemption of God, as through Jesus our sin is forgiven and our hope is restored. So, today, we follow the flow of history in God’s Big Story as we trace the steps of Jesus after his temptation in the wilderness to the beginning of his ministry in his hometown in Nazareth to his work in the city of Capernaum.

A little boy was sick on Palm Sunday and stayed home from church with his mother. When his family came home from church, all of his sisters were carrying palm branches. The little boy was curious and asked, "Why does every one have that branch, Dad?" His father replied, "You see, when Jesus came
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into town, everyone waved palm branches to honor him, so we received palm branches in church today." The little boy replied, "Ohhhh! The one Sunday I miss is the Sunday that Jesus shows up!"

Well, the good news is that Jesus always shows up, that Jesus is present in every place and in every moment, including this moment and this place and, so, in every place and moment, we may experience the wonder of seeing Jesus. In the story we are reading in Luke, Jesus does show up at the synagogue of his childhood home in the town of Nazareth.

Luke describes the beginning of Jesus’ ministry this way: “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 [in the prophet Isaiah] 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’” (Luke 4:16-21).

Two things flow out of that moment. Jesus’ home town reacts, and his public ministry begins. At first, the hometown crowd is pleased. A son of their community has come home in the role of visiting rabbi, read the scripture and sat in the seat from which the rabbi was to expound on the scripture reading. You can just hear the folk whispering! “Ahhhh! Is this not Joseph’s son. He’s all grown up. What gracious things he just said. You remember him. He was first chair trumpet in the Nazareth High School marching band and won the local woodworkers competition that took him to State. He’s so adorable!”

Then Jesus said, “And he said, ‘Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown”’ (Luke 4:24). And he went on with two Old Testament illustrations of people whose ears were closed to the hometown prophet, and the people became so filled with rage they actually tried to kill Jesus.

We all know of leaders loved at first and reviled later, often for reasons that have little to do with the leader. For Jesus, this happened early on and, as he begins his public ministry, the die is already cast—some will love him and others hate him.

Now, when he spoke in his hometown synagogue, he quoted from the prophet Isaiah and sitting down had said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” He didn’t mean it was fulfilled symbolically but quite literally, and each line in the quote from Isaiah he read described something that he then actually does in the next few days, as recorded for us in this fourth chapter of Luke. In fact, just a few weeks earlier, he had been
baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan, and God’s Spirit had descended on him, an anointing with water and the Spirit, accompanied by the words, “You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.” So, indeed, Jesus was correct when he began, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me…” Let’s see how the works described in the prophecy of Isaiah read by Jesus parallel the events recorded in Luke 4.

Jesus quoted Isaiah: “He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” Luke says immediately after leaving his hometown of Nazareth we read, “He went down to Capernaum, a city in Galilee, and was teaching them on the sabbath. They were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority”. So he brought good news to the poor—certainly the poor in spirit.

Jesus quoted Isaiah, “He has anointed me to proclaim release to the captives, to let the oppressed go free.” And Luke reports, “In the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon [talk about a captive and one who was oppressed], and he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.’ But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ When the demon had thrown him down before them, he came out of him without having done him any harm.” So Jesus released the captive and let the oppressed go free.

Jesus quoted Isaiah, “He has anointed me to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind.” Luke reports, “After leaving the synagogue he entered Simon’s house. Now Simon’s mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked him about her. Then he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. Immediately she got up and began to serve them. As the sun was setting, all those who had any who were sick with various kinds of diseases brought them to him; and he laid his hands on each of them and cured them.” So indeed Jesus did offer recovery of sight to the blind and healing every kind of affliction (also see Matthew 4:23, 9:35).

Finally, as Jesus quoted Isaiah, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me…to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And Luke reports, “At daybreak he departed and went into a deserted place [to pray]. And the crowds were looking for him; and when they reached him, they wanted to prevent him from leaving them. But he said to them, ‘I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.’ So he continued proclaiming the message in the synagogues of Judea.” So, in fact, Jesus did proclaim the year of God’s favor.

Everything Isaiah said the Messiah would do Jesus did: bring good news to the poor, bring release to the captives and let the oppressed go free, proclaim recovery of sight.
The Messiah is the one to move us from the Creation-Fall portion of God’s Big Story into the story of Redemption.

Jesus claimed to be and demonstrated he actually is the Messiah, bringing God’s rescue, restoration and recovery that we call redemption. God’s Big Story is the story of moving from bondage to freedom, from hurt to hope through the loving ministry, sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus.

So, what is happening in your own life today? Do you feel poor in spirit or captive to some reality or oppressed by some situation, or blind to what you should be seeing? There are a lot of circumstances in life that leave us feeling pretty bound up. Charles Colson tells about Pat Novak, a pastor who was visiting in a hospital one summer morning when he was called to visit a patient admitted with an undiagnosed ailment.

John, a man in his sixties, had not responded to any treatment; medical and psychological tests were inconclusive. Yet, he was wasting away; he had not even been able to swallow for two weeks. When Pat walked into the room, John was sitting limply in his bed, strung with IV tubes, staring listlessly at the wall with hollow eyes.

As they talked, Pat sensed that God was urging him to do something specific, so he asked John if he wanted to take Communion. At that John broke down. "I can't!" he cried. "I've sinned and I can't be forgiven." Pat asked John if he wanted to confess his sin. John nodded gratefully. Pat will never reveal the particular sin John confessed but he did say that what John confessed did not strike him as particularly terrible. Yet it had been draining the life from this man. John wept as he confessed, and Pat laid hands on him, hugged him, and told John his sins were forgiven because if we confess our sins, Jesus is faithful to forgive them. Pat gave John a Bible and told him he would be back later. Already John was sitting up straighter, with a flicker of light in his eyes. Pat visited a few more patients and then ate some lunch in the hospital cafeteria. When he left, he wrapped an extra piece of bread in a napkin and borrowed a coffee cup from the cafeteria. He ran out to a shop a few blocks away and bought a container of grape juice. Then he returned to John's room with the elements and celebrated Communion with him, again reciting 1 Corinthians 11. John took the bread and chewed it slowly. It was the first time in weeks he had been able to take solid food in his mouth. He took the cup and swallowed. He had been set free. Within three days, John walked out of that hospital.

Jesus is the Lord who brings good news to the poor, brings release to the captives and lets the oppressed go free, proclaims recovery of sight to the blind and proclaims the year of God’s favor. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. The same Jesus who healed in the town of Capernaum and who set the man named John free is the same Jesus who will set you free. Trust him. Embrace Him. Love and follow him, for surely he loves you!
All we have to do is open our eyes of faith and we, too, will see our Lord’s hand at work and be amazed.

What was the reaction of the crowds after Jesus left his hometown. It can be put very simply. They were amazed. Luke uses the word over and over. Amazed at the power and presence of God in Jesus. Amazed to see those in bondage set free. The very word amazed expresses how astonishing is the reality and the power of God in our world. All we have to do is open our eyes of faith and we, too, will see our Lord’s hand at work and be amazed.

Max Lucado tells of receiving a call from a friend named Kenny. "He [Kenny] and his family had just returned from Disney World. I saw a sight I’ll never forget, he said. My family and I were inside Cinderella’s castle. It was packed with kids and parents. Suddenly all the children rushed to one side. Cinderella had entered the castle. The pristine princess was perfectly typecast. She was a gorgeous young girl with each hair in place, flawless skin, and a beaming smile. She stood waist-deep in a crowd of kids, each wanting to touch and be touched. For some reason I turned and looked toward the other side of the castle. It was now empty except for a boy maybe seven or eight years old. His age was hard to determine because of the disfigurement of his body. Dwarfed in height, face deformed, he stood watching quietly and wistfully, holding the hand of an older brother. You know what he wanted. He wanted to be with the children. He longed to be in the middle of the kids reaching for Cinderella, calling her name. You can feel his bondage, feel his oppression, feel his need of God’s favor and feel his fear of yet another rejection. Don’t you wish Cinderella would go to him?

“Kenny said, Guess what? She did! She noticed the little boy. She immediately began walking in his direction. Polite but firmly inching through the crowd of children, she finally broke free. She walked quickly across the floor, knelt at eye level with the stunned little boy, and placed a kiss on his face.

“I thought you would appreciate the story,” Kenny told Max Lucado. "I did," said Max. “It reminded me of another story. The names are different, but isn’t the story almost the same? Rather than a princess of Disney, it’s the Prince of Peace. But Jesus did more than Cinderella. She gave only a kiss. When she stood to leave, she took her beauty with her. The boy was still captive to his situation. What if Cinderella had done what Jesus did? What if she assumed his state? What she had somehow given him her beauty and taken on his disfigurement? That’s what Jesus did. “He took our suffering on him... He was wounded for the wrong we did; and he offers to make us well in spirit. We are healed because of his wounds.”

Jesus has proven His love for you, and now He is alive and He invites you to decide to follow him and make following him central to your life. Whatever you may find as a source of bondage in your life where you are poor in spirit or captive to some reality or oppressed by some situation or needing a good word of God’s favor, Jesus, who
fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy in the sight of the people of Nazareth and Capernaum, will fulfill it in your life, too. See him with your eyes of faith. Trust him, embrace him, confess your sin and need of him and follow him, knowing he is embracing you!

See him with your eyes of faith. Trust him, embrace him, confess your sin and need of him and follow him, knowing he is embracing you!