

[Luke 4.16](#) 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:

[Luke 4.18](#) “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.”

[Luke 4.20](#) 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.”

[Luke 4.22](#) All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” they asked.

[Luke 4.23](#) Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

[Luke 4.24](#) “I tell you the truth,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. [25](#) I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. [26](#) Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. [27](#) And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

[Luke 4.28](#) All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. [29](#) They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him down the cliff. [30](#) But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Well, as in the past several weeks, we have a pretty big passage that covers a few pretty significant stories: the temptation of Jesus, the beginning of Jesus ministry, an exorcism, and the healing of Simon’s mom. But today I want to look at verses 16-30: the part where Jesus makes this proclamation in the synagogue about his mission.

Now because I’m big on context, let’s go back and take a look at where we’ve been so far: Luke is a book that has big ambitions. He says right at the beginning that he wants to take all of the stories and information out there and compile them into one straightforward account of the message of Jesus. And so he starts even before Jesus, starts with Zechariah and John the Baptist, because these guys are intimately tied up in the story of Jesus and he wants to make sure that the stage is set for Jesus himself to arrive. Then he tells of the angel’s visit to Mary, and of the miraculous birth of Jesus, the incredible, monumental, unbelievable birth of the God of the Universe as a small baby boy. And he places this incredible event in the context of the Roman world, fits it into the time frame of the mightiest empire on earth...but from the beginning, it’s the

teenage virgin girl, it's the humble shepherds, the tiny pastoral village of Bethlehem, the old man who has been waiting for the consolation of the people of Israel, for freedom from their oppressors, the old old widow who spent day after day praying in the temple. It is these people, not the powerful Romans, not the elite Jewish Sadducees or Pharisees, not Herod's powerful family, not Rome or Jerusalem or Alexandria or any other high profile cultural center, but it's the lowly, the humbled, the meek who are the first to see and hear the glorious good news that the Messiah, the Savior, God himself has been born into the world.

And this is the theme that Luke extends throughout his gospel. As he tells us the story of Jesus, he is very careful to show us that Jesus is very, very concerned about the poor, the lowly, the outcast, the marginalized, the oppressed. And it starts right from Jesus' first public declaration of his ministry.

“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,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Jesus is quoting here from Isaiah 61. Luke records for us the first several lines of that passage, but I suspect that Jesus probably would have read a slightly longer section...Luke is giving us the abbreviated version, he's just telling us what we need to know for him to make his point. So let's flip back to Isaiah and see what it's about:

[Isa 61.1](#) The Spirit of the Lord Yahweh is on me, because Yahweh has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, [2](#) to proclaim the year of Yahweh's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, [3](#) and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of Yahweh for the display of his splendor.

[Isa 61.4](#) They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

[Isa 61.5](#) Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.

[Isa 61.6](#) And you will be called priests of Yahweh, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.

[Isa 61.7](#) Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs.

[Isa 61.8](#) “For I, Yahweh, love justice; I hate robbery and iniquity. In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them.

[Isa 61.9](#) Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people whom Yahweh has blessed.”

[Isa 61.10](#) I delight greatly in Yahweh;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

[Isa 61.11](#) For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Lord Yahweh will make righteousness and praise
spring up before all nations.

You see? There is so much more than what Luke gives to us. But Luke, by sticking in that one verse quote, is pointing to the entire passage. He is declaring that a new day has come for Israel. A day of redemption when God will reestablish himself and his kingdom over the people of Israel and even more, he will make righteousness and praise spring up before all nations. And Jesus says “Today, in me, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus has come to bring *good* news. Not bad, good. Not condemnation, freedom. It’s news of healing and of release and of God’s favor. At this time in history, Israel was being tossed back and forth from one empire to another, never really having control over their own destiny except for during one short period...but even then, things just didn’t go too well for them. Israel, Palestine sits at the crossroads, the place where Africa and Asia and Europe come together. And so the world’s mightiest empires—Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome—they all would come storming through, trampling on Israel as they went on to take over the world. And they would each try to hold this strategic piece of land, because whoever controlled Palestine controlled the routes to the whole world.

And so Israel languished under the oppression of these foreign empires. They tried all sorts of things, thinking that if they could just be more righteous, if they could just follow the Torah, the Law, *better* than God would liberate them. And so you had the Pharisees who became very legalistic, following the Law to the T and getting pretty frustrated with everyone who couldn’t do as good as them. You had the Essenes, who just decided to leave all that corrupt civilization stuff behind, go hide in the desert and hope that maybe there we could be truly holy. You had the Zealots who decided to take matters into their own hands, they were guerilla warriors, terrorists who would assassinate whatever Roman they could or whatever Jew got in their way.

All of these people were waiting for the Day of the Lord, the Day of Yahweh. All throughout the books of the prophets, there was this talk about a day when Yahweh God would come down to liberate the people of Israel, liberate them from the other oppressive nations, but also to liberate them from themselves, to liberate them from

their own destructive tendencies. They weren't denying their own sinfulness. They knew that they weren't following God like they should, like the covenant stipulated. When they say "He has clothed me in a garment of salvation and a robe of righteousness" they aren't claiming to be perfect, but it is a prayer for Yahweh to break through their own sinful nature, to cleanse them and make them holy. They asked for vindication not only from their enemies but from their own destructive patterns.

Moses, back in the book of Deuteronomy had warned Israel that if they failed to follow the Law, that it would bring about problems...there were bad consequences for their failure to listen to God. And this wasn't just because of a wrathful God chucking lightning bolts at them...It's because God gave them the Law for their benefit. The Law was an instruction manual for how to be his people, how to have a good relationship with God and how to have a well ordered society in which everyone from the bottom to the top was taken care of.

As Christians, we are often pretty quick to condemn the law because we quote Paul where he talks about the Law bringing death. But that wasn't the Jewish mentality, and I think that we do the text a disservice, that we even distort the text when we talk about the Law as oppressive or as merely a way for God to throw Israel's unrighteousness back in their face.

The Law was good. But Israel, being human, didn't follow it too well. And as one thing began to slide, another would follow. First they stop looking out for their neighbor's ox, then they stop looking out for their neighbor. Before you know it, they are no longer observing the Year of Jubilee and their fellow Israelites are living in poverty. Maybe they begin to look to other gods, the gods of the nations around them, then they forget about offering Yahweh their sacrifices...before long, they are building altars to pagan idols and practicing cultic prostitution. And around and around and down it goes...a downward spiral until they crash. They are caught up in the web of their own sinfulness. Like we all are...as individuals, as a community, as a society, as a nation, as a human race. When we start down the road away from following God, it gets harder and harder to turn back.

But every so often a prophet would come along who would remind Israel of what it is that they were called to, of all that God promised them if they would follow him. And these prophets would paint a picture of that day when Yahweh would bring Israel back to his covenant, when he would get rid of the evil nations that attacked and oppressed them and when he would get rid of the evil within Israel themselves.

So when Jesus stands up to read Isaiah in the synagogue...this is everything that he is calling up! This is huge!

He's not just reading a pretty little saying, a happy story about some nice guy that is going to come and throw daisies on everyone's heads...He is talking about the radical transformation of the world by Yahweh...and Jesus says "It's coming through me."

And it says the people were awestruck...amazed...and confused. "We know this kid" they said. "He grew up here. That's Joseph's son."

But Jesus isn't done. They're about to get more confused. He's just brought up a promise of Israel's vindication and redemption, but he's about to burst the bubble. Listen to this next part again

Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself! Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'"

[Luke 4.24](#) "I tell you the truth," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown. [25](#) I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. [26](#) Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. [27](#) And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian."

And then the people got angry. WHY?

Because he's saying, "However you think that God is working, whatever you are expecting from him...that's not how he's working. He is there where you least expect it. God is working in a new way, a way that you don't understand. He is not coming in on a war horse to kick out the Romans, there's not going to be a slaughter of all these pagan idol worshippers...He is doing something new. The story is not just about Israel. When there was famine in the land, God came to a Gentile woman. When there was leprosy, he went to a Syrian man. He is coming, he is here to liberate each and every one of you, every person on the face of the earth—Jews, Gentiles, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Atheists...—he wants to save all of us from a life that leads to death...to give us *abundant life, true life, life that is actually alive!*"

My friends, God is not confined to the ways that we *think* he should work. This is the message that Jesus preached that day in the synagogue. He was saying, "Let go of what you want from God. Let go of who you think God is, of what you think it means to be saved, of what you think it means to be righteous...and get on board." Get on board with what God IS doing in the world. Get on board with him where HE is at.

Friends, the Kingdom of God is coming...the Kingdom of God is here! And we are called to participate in it. But it's so easy to let ourselves get in the way.

The people in the synagogue responded to Jesus with anger and they were going to throw Jesus off a cliff because he told them that God is not just about Israel...it's not just your Jewish heritage that is going to save you...not just the one redeeming thing that you believe about yourself.

Later on, Jesus gets pretty harsh with the Pharisees. And it's my belief that it's because they are the ones who are so close, they have so much potential for good...

The Pharisees came about because when Israel was in exile in Babylon, they began to ask how it was that God could have allowed them to be defeated by the evil nations. And some people, in response to that question said, it's simple...it's because we ignored the law and worshipped other gods. So how are we going to make sure that it doesn't happen again? We're going to be super strict in how we interpret the law so that we don't even get close to breaking it. And this group became known as the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were the ones who very, very truly and rightly and honestly wanted to be holy, to be righteous, to pursue relationship with God. But as they did that, they became concerned with what they should NOT do, more so than with what they should do. They were concerned with those who weren't living up to the high standards they set for themselves. It was those sinners whose actions kept Israel from being an independent, holy nation. If those guys would stop failing, stop sinning, then we would be holy and Yahweh would liberate us from our oppressors.

And so more and more, very slowly, the Pharisees in their pursuit of loving God drifted away from truly loving their neighbors. They were very sincere in their worship of God. But in doing so, they lost their concern for seeking liberation for the oppressed, for seeking justice, for seeking the welfare of all people, for seeking abundant life.

Have we, Christians, become the new Pharisees? Are we the ones who are getting in the way of the good news, the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we so set in our beliefs and our doctrines and our Sunday rituals and our morning devotions and our prayer that we have failed to see, failed to help bring about the Kingdom of God in our world? Have we abandoned our post as prophets who speak good news to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, release for the oppressed, who proclaim the time of God's redemption of humanity? If Jesus, unbeknownst to us, was sitting in our midst and stood up to tell us that God was at work and that it wasn't in the ways that we preach, that God was more concerned with how we, you and me, treat our homosexual neighbors than he is about whether those neighbors are legally married or not...that he is just as concerned with the taking of life through war as he is about the taking of life through abortion...that God is not confined to the boxes that our culture, our politics, our religion, our nation, you and I have created for him...If Jesus stood up to preach that right here, would you be angry? Or would you get on board?

My friends, THIS is the message of Jesus Christ: that we can be free from our own tendency to destroy ourselves, that he loves and wants to give life to everyone...Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Athesits...good and bad...those who know him and those who don't... THIS is why he came: to liberate, to set free, to heal. So get on board. Help him to create and give that abundant life.