

Texts: **Luke 4: 14-21**

It was April 16, 2009. Ten games after the baseball season had begun. The New York Yankees spent those first ten games on the road, before returning to the Bronx to play their first official game in the brand new Yankee Stadium. This was the grand opening of the newest and most expensive cathedral in all of baseball. The ceremonies began a full hour before the game. There was a concert, a dedication of the plaques honoring past players in Monument Park, an official “introduction” of the pitcher’s mound, the home plate, and the flag that would fly over the stadium. Kelly Clarkston sang the national anthem while F-16 fighter jets flew overhead. Yankee legend, Yogi Berra, threw out the first pitch. Before the Yankees came to bat in the bottom of the first inning, they even brought out an “holy relic”—the bat that Babe Ruth had used to hit the first home run in the original Yankee Stadium in 1923—and placed it on home plate to “bless” it. The stadium was packed with celebrities and all sorts of New York dignitaries. Even for die-hard Braves fans, who can’t stand the Yankees, you have to admit, this first game in the new Yankee Stadium was—as far a baseball is concerned—the grandest grand opening of them all.¹

Well, in a sense, this morning’s story from the gospel of Luke serves as the Grand Opening for Jesus’ public ministry. Luke has already told us the background story of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, one scene from his childhood, and an insight into his identity with the accounts of his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. For the Yankees, the 2009 season had already begun before they came home for the grand opening. Likewise, Luke tells us that Jesus had already been active in Galilee “teach[ing] in their synagogues,” but the real story begins when he returns to his hometown of Nazareth. This is where the public ministry of Jesus really kicks off. This is the Grand Opening. All the teaching, preaching, healings, and miracles; all the confusing parables, all the actions that offend the authorities; the whole life that leads to the cross and the empty tomb—all of it—begins here in Nazareth, in an ordinary place of worship, on a normal Sabbath morning.

Jesus takes his place on that pew where his family has always sat during worship. When it’s time to read the scripture for the morning, they invite “Joseph’s boy”, Nazareth’s favorite son, to come up front, read the scripture, and share with them some of this famous wisdom that they’ve been hearing all about. And so, Jesus stands up and reads the words we just heard from the 61st chapter of the prophet Isaiah:

‘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.’

Then, Jesus rolls up the scroll to indicate that he’s finished reading.

Now, for the sermon. The people of Nazareth just can’t wait to hear what Jesus has to say, and he gives them what must be the shortest sermon ever preached. One sentence! To explain the words of the prophet Isaiah, all he says is, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That’s it. Amen. Luke tells us that after this, “all spoke well of him,” well, after a sermon that only lasted ten seconds, of course they “spoke well of him,” what do you expect? Now in truth, the story gets much more complicated, and next week, Allen will finish the story of

how, when Jesus explains what he means, the people of Nazareth reject him and even try to kill him.

This morning, however, we're invited to push pause on examining the crowd's response. The end of the story can wait till next week. For now, let us focus our attention on what Jesus says, here at the beginning of his ministry. This is the inauguration of what will become a pattern in Luke's Gospel, Jesus' ministry is understood as the fulfillment of the Old Testament witness (particularly of the prophets) and this fulfillment is greater, and broader, and more inclusive than people had ever imagined. The good news that Jesus comes to bring isn't just for the rich and famous—it isn't just for those who would be in attendance at, say, the grand opening of the new Yankee Stadium. No, the gospel that Jesus comes to bring is particularly focused on those who are **poor, captive, in prison, blind, and oppressed**. Grand Openings are important events that speak to one's identity. All the pomp and circumstance for the New Yankee stadium was a way of defining the identity of the team. It was a way for the dynastic Yankees to say, "This is what kind of team we are, champions with a strong tradition!" By reading the words of Isaiah and identifying himself with their fulfillment, Jesus is saying, "This is what kind of Messiah I am, one who brings good news to the poor!" I am the Messiah of Good News, and that good news, that gospel, is on some people that you might never have expected. By beginning his story here, Luke is telling us, his audience, that everything else which Jesus will do should be seen through the lens of this understanding of the gospel.

It is important to note the way that Jesus makes this grand declaration. He is in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the place of worship for the Hebrew churchgoers, and he explains his identity and his mission by using the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah, written 500 years before Christ. For **500 years**, half of a millennium, the people of Israel had been gathering to worship and reading from their scriptures—scriptures which included this promise of a Messiah who would usher in the Kingdom of God. After all this time of waiting and hoping, many of them, no doubt, must have wondered if there was any truth in these prophecies. "Is it true?" they must have asked themselves, however quietly. For many of us still, this question is part of our own struggle. Is it true? Is all this talk of Jesus and the gospel really true? Really?

The Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, suggests not only that most of us ask this question, but that is precisely this question that deep deep down sends us to church most Sundays. In a lecture addressed to a group of preachers in 1922, Barth reminded them of the significance of this question in the minds and hearts of those who come to worship. "Is it true?" Barth asks.

"Is it true, this sense of a unity in diversity...of a righteousness not somewhere behind the stars but within the events which are our present life, of a heaven above the earth...Is it true, this talk of a loving and good God who is more than one of the friendly idols...What the people want to find out and thoroughly understand is, Is it true? And so they reach, not knowing what they do, toward the unprecedented possibility of praying, of reading the Bible, of speaking, hearing, and singing of God.

Barth continues:

...They want to find out and thoroughly understand the answer to this one question: Is it true?—and not some other answer which beats around the bush...People naturally do not shout it out, and least of all to the ears of us ministers...But let us not be deceived by their silence. Blood and tears, deepest despair and highest hope, a passionate longing to lay hold of that... or rather **him** who, overcomes this world because he is the Creator and Redeemer, its beginning and ending as Lord, a passionate longing to have the *word*

spoken, *the* word which promises *grace* in judgment, *life* in death, and the *beyond* in the here and now, God's word—this [is what sends people to worship].ⁱⁱ

This longing and questioning was no doubt present in that synagogue in Nazareth, too. And so, when Jesus reads the promise of Isaiah that the oppressed will be free, surely those people in the congregation, living under the oppression of the Roman Empire were longing to know, "Is it true?"

Jesus answers simply: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Full of the Holy Spirit and standing on the shoulders of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus proclaims, as simply as he can, "Yes." *Yes*, it is true. The ministry of Jesus that begins here in Nazareth is the answer to this question. The good news of the gospel is, as Barth is fond of saying, "the divine Yes" that is spoken as the Word of God.

Not only does this one-sentence sermon answer the deep and longing question of the worshipers, but it does so with immediacy! Jesus says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Today. TODAY. His words are not a blissful promise of a dream that will come in the sweet by and by of an indefinite future. Neither are they a glossy sentimental description of the "good ole days" of the past when things were better. No, Jesus speaks about today. *The present*. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." As Fred Craddock notes, "the first public word of Jesus... apart from reading Scripture, is 'today.' The age of God's reign is here; the... time when God's promises are fulfilled and God's purpose comes to fruition has arrived... this is the beginning of [the] jubilee. The time of God is today!"ⁱⁱⁱ Ever since this grand opening of Jesus' ministry, the church (when it has stayed true to its mission) has remained in this constant state of "today." Seeking to serve in the present amidst the real needs of today's world.

As the body of Christ, the church stays true to its identity when it proclaims in word and in deed the good news of the one who is the head of the church. The good news of the one "anointed by the spirit to bring release to the captives." In a sense, this story of Jesus' reading and preaching serves as the key theme for Luke's Gospel, and in turn, as a Mission Statement for the church whom the Spirit has gathered to follow this Messiah. Luke invites us in the church to ask these kind of questions:

- How are we responding to the call to proclaim the gospel?
 - Are we bringing good news to the poor?
 - Are we proclaiming release to those who are captive and recovery of sight to those who are blind?
 - Are we helping the oppressed go free?
 - Are we proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor?
- Jesus said, "This is what kind of Messiah I am."--how are we, as his church, following him?

One way we answer this call is by being clear in our mission as the church. The first chapter of the *Book of Order*—the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA)—contains a description of the church and its mission that we, Presbyterians, have held to for a century. In words that echo the promises of Isaiah, the *Book of Order* proclaims, "The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world," (G-1.0200). This is one way that we identify who we are as

the church, it is one way that we explain how we respond to the call of the Christ who “brings good news to the poor,” and “helps the oppressed go free.”

But there are many other ways we proclaim the gospel—other ways we follow the Christ who describes himself as the one who comes to bring good news, release, and freedom

We follow Christ’s call **to bring good news to the poor** every time that we show up to serve a meal and listen to people’s stories at Triune Mercy enter, or strap on our shoes to Walk for the Homeless with United Ministries. And we bring good news to the poor in spirit every time we speak words of encouragement and love to those struggling with depression and loss of hope.

We follow Christ’s call **to proclaim release to the captives** when we reach out to visit those who are often forgotten behind prison doors. And we proclaim release to those captive to addictions every time we help a loved one to deal with the truth and begin the process of healing.

We follow Christ’s call **to bring recovery of sight to the blind** every time we write cards, deliver meals, and remember in prayer those who are sick and in need of healing. And every time we tutor a child at Sterling or volunteer to teach GED students, we help *restore a vision* of self-worth to those whose life situation has *blinded* them to their identity as children of God.

We follow Christ’s call **to let the oppressed go free** as we respond with an outpouring of mercy, sympathy, and financial donations to help our sisters and brothers in Haiti who are oppressed by both political instability and the destructive forces of nature. And we let the oppressed go free every time that we lend a listening ear to a teenager struggling to make sense of their lives under the oppressive pressures of peers, parents, school work and the constant need to fit in.

We follow Christ’s call **to proclaim the year of our Lord’s favor**, the year of Jubilee, every time we work for the end of injustice in our world and every time we gather around the Lord’s Table to celebrate the “joyful feast of the kingdom of God.”

In very real, very specific ways, in word and in deed, we are called to joyfully participate in the “Yes” that God is speaking to a world yearning to know “Is it true?”

Ultimately, *we* cannot answer that question. It is God *alone* who answers. As the living Word of God, Jesus Christ is God’s answer to the question, “Is it true?” and as Karl Barth reminds us, “God’s answer [is] a final answer, which redeems, recreates, enlivens, and makes happy; an answer which casts the light of eternity upon time and upon all things in time; an answer which generates hope and obedience.”^{iv} As the church, serving in hope and obedience, we merely point to God’s answer by living lives of thanksgiving that joyfully respond to the good news of Jesus Christ, the one who inaugurated his ministry by saying “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” To Christ be all glory and honor, dominion and power. Amen.

ⁱ Details of the Opening Day events for the New Yankee Stadium found at:
<http://newstadiuminsider.blogspot.com/2009/04/schedule-of-events-for-new-yankee.html>

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, “The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching,” in *The Word of God & the Word of Man*. Translated by Douglas Horton (1957), pp. 108-109.

ⁱⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, *Luke* from the Interpretation Commentary series (1990), p. 62.

^{iv} Barth, 121.