

“Anointed By God”
Luke 4:14-21- 3rd Sunday of Epiphany
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CCUMC
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Introduction

We say thousands of words in a day (women typically say thousands more than men). Some words carry much more import than others; they cast a vision, they offer something new, they transform. Words like, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Words like, “Will you marry me?” Words from a CEO, “Our company is expanding; each of you will receive a raise.”

In this week’s reading from Luke, we are given visionary words, significant words. These words come from Jesus, and they are his account of what he has come to offer to the world. Jesus’ words in our text today are his first spoken words in the gospel of Luke. These first words offer a synopsis of several important themes for the gospel of Luke. In a sense, these words are Jesus’ inaugural address.

Perhaps some of you heard President Obama’s inaugural address this week. The president used his address to announce his priorities for his second term. The address was more than just a set of priorities though; it was a vision of what Obama felt this country can and should be. Regardless of your politics, we could (possibly) agree that in his speech were some words meant to evoke an aspiration for the country. Words like, “We are true to our creed when a little girl born into the bleakest poverty knows that she has the same chance to succeed as anybody else because she is an American, she is free, and she is equal, not just in the eyes of God, but also in our own.” These are inaugural words. President Abraham Lincoln gave arguably the most visionary inaugural address. As he stepped into his second term in the midst of the devastation of war, President Lincoln named the evil of slavery, the

toll the Civil war had exacted upon the nation, and the need to resolve both the war and its cause. Those were inaugural words, calling forth a vision out of darkness.

Jesus' Inaugural Address

Jesus steps up on the inaugural stage. He's in his hometown of Nazareth, the place where he grew up. Surely family were in the synagogue that day. His neighborhood friends, his schoolteachers, fellow carpenters; they were all there to worship. Before Jesus speaks, everyone has listened to the reading from the Torah—one of the first five books of the Bible. This reading would have been the one prescribed for that particular Friday evening. Then Jesus, the hometown boy, whose been making some news with reports of his speeches in surrounding areas, stands up. The Hazzan, or the assistant, hands him the large scroll of the prophets. Jesus unrolled it to the words he wanted to read, to speak forth his first words, his inaugural words in the gospel of Luke. He chooses the book of Isaiah, chapter 61, with a bit from Isaiah 58 mixed in. His first words, his words of vision, are the words of scripture. He reads aloud, "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 (from Isaiah 58), to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." These words, these important words reveal who Jesus is, what Jesus will do, and for whom Jesus has come.

These words from Isaiah are so important because Jesus uses them to situate the character of his mission within the Jewish hope for the restoration of Israel. He is extending the hope for a Messiah to himself; he is offering a time a jubilee, of restoration through his life and ministry. He is telling his Hebrew audience that he is the one who has come to fulfill God's promises. You'd better believe these are words of vision, transformative words.

Besides telling who he is, and what he will do, Jesus articulates for whom he has come. He comes to bring good news to the poor, to the captive, to the blind, to the oppressed. Jesus has not come for the wealthy, the comfortable, the well-to-do. Jesus has come for those on the margins of society. Jesus is following the words his mother sang in the Magnificat in Luke chapter 1—that God has come to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things. The Greek word used for poor here doesn't refer to those who are materially wealthy, but spiritually impoverished. The word for "poor" means those who are the marginal—those excluded from social and religious life for any number of factors, such as gender, age, economic destitution, physical malady, or disease. Jesus is announcing that he has come to bring good news to those in need. These are the ones for whom he has come.

Jesus' Address to Us

For some of us here today, we can simply take Jesus' words to heart. Those of you who feel in deep need today, and can admit to that need, Jesus has come for you, to satisfy your deepest longings, to heal your hurts and fears. Those of you who feel on the margin, who are economically poor, or have a disease, or are at an age not respected by our youth-adoring culture, you can know that Jesus has come to offer help and comfort—to bring sight, healing, freedom and more. Jesus has come to bring you into Jubilee—into a time of joy and celebration.

For others of us here today, Jesus offers us an invitation, couched in the words from the prophet Isaiah, to not just hear good news, but to *be* it. We, as Christ's body here on earth, are called to be release to captives, to offer freedom to the oppressed. We are to be God's hands delivering the promise of good news to those on the margins. "Are you in prison?" we ask the captives. Then let us come visit you, let us hear your story, let us pray

with you. “Are you blind? Are you sick? Are you struggling with an infirmity?” Then let us come to you, let us care for you. “Are you oppressed? Discouraged? Downtrodden?” Then let us gather together, worship together, and encourage you.

I invite you to hear how Jesus’ inaugural words may be addressing you, may be calling to you to be the body of Christ, living out and extending God’s good news to all those whom we meet. In just a moment, I’m going to give you some time to write and reflect on this call—a call to be with the poor, the marginalized, the lowly, the captive, the oppressed. I wanted to give you some more information on the challenge to proclaim release, or freedom to the captive in our American context. Captive, of course, is another word for prisoner. In the United States, more citizens are incarcerated than in any other western nation. Attorney Lisa Bloom writes, “The United States leads the world in the rate of incarcerating its own citizens. We imprison more of our own people than any other country on earth, including China, which has four times our population, or in human history.” Over two million people are currently locked in American prisons.¹ We have more people incarcerated in solitary confinement than any other country in the world; many organizations, including Physicians for Human Rights, classifies solitary confinement as torture.² Michelle Alexander, in her insightful book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* argues that the extraordinarily high rate of incarceration of African-American men in US prisons functions as a tool of systematic, racialized disenfranchisement.³ “Our nation incarcerates African Americans at a rate more than six times the representation in the

¹ Lisa Bloom, “When Will the US Stop Mass Incarceration?” www.cnn.com/2012/07/03/bloom-prison-spending/index.

² <http://afsc.org/resource/solitary-confinement-facts>.

³ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012),

general population.⁴ In addition to such racial apartheid in prisons, people with serious mental illness are more likely to wind up in prison than in psychiatric care in some states.⁵ Releasing the captive is going to take some hefty amount of good news in our culture. The Greek word for release is *aphesis* and it means to set free, to let go. We, church, have a lot to do if we are going to really step into Jesus' inaugural words for us today.

On the pews I've placed some notecards. I'm going to give you a time of silence, in which you can write on this card ways you think that we as a church might become good news, to proclaim release to the captives, to set the oppressed free. Then I'm going to invite you to share in small groups in the pews. Let us do this whole time of holy conversation in a spirit of prayer. Use this time of silence now to pray and write on your notecard, if you wish.

(silence) Now I invite you to break into small groups, and share with each other your thoughts. Elect a spokesperson who is willing to share with the whole congregation the most salient, the best ideas that sparked the group. (sharing in small groups—call groups to order with singing bowl) sharing from groups

Silence

Prayer of Confession

⁴ Madeline McClenney-Sadler, "Anti-Incarceration Day Lectionary Commentary," The African American Lectionary. Accessed on January 21, 2013.

⁵ Lauren Winner, "The Hardest Question," January 20, 2013.