

“What Is the Boldest Claim You Ever Made?”

Luke 4:14-21

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This morning our attention is drawn to Jesus' first visit to his hometown of Nazareth after beginning his public ministry. Jesus knew these people well because this city of 20,000 citizens on the western side of the Sea of Galilee was his home for almost thirty years. It was here Jesus grew up as a little boy and came of age as a young man.

On the Sabbath, Jesus went to the synagogue as was his custom to worship God and to discuss the mysteries of life and faith with his longtime friends. He was treated as an honored guest due to the good work he had already done throughout the region, and he was asked to read one of the passages from the Torah.

He was handed the scroll from Isaiah, which meant he probably selected the passages from Isaiah 58 and 61 that he read. No doubt his choice met with broad approval as this was a favorite of people familiar with problems who longed for someone to make hope visible.

“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 and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

This is where our story takes an interesting twist. After rolling up the scroll and handing it to the attendant, Jesus sat down, indicating he wanted to offer a brief commentary on this passage.

All commotion in the synagogue came to a halt as every eye was fixed upon Jesus. “Today,” he said, “this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21)

These final words caught everyone by surprise. I suspect there could have been a collective gasp on the part of those who were in attendance that day. They were not expecting Jesus to make such a bold and outlandish claim.

“Isn't this Joseph's son?” they asked one another. How could the little boy they saw playing in the streets of Nazareth and the young man who made the furniture in their homes possibly be the fulfillment of this great promise?

Sure they were pleased Jesus had accepted the call to be a rabbi and in all likelihood they were hoping he would come back home to be the leader of their synagogue, but they had

to wonder if he had unrealistic visions of grandeur. Was he a little too full of himself that day when he declared he was also a prophet, or maybe even the long awaited Messiah?

Before the day was over, their mood radically changed as their confusion turned to anger. After reading the scripture, Jesus told everyone listening to him the good news he was sent by God to deliver was not just for Jews, but it was also for Gentiles. Furthermore, he intended to follow Elijah and Elisha's example of reaching out to people from all walks of life who were struggling to survive.

This broad and inclusive concept of ministry did not set well with the worshipers that day. The idea that God was concerned about the welfare of those who were not faithful, dedicated Jews was more than they could handle.

Swiftly, they turned against Jesus. With the mentality of a mob caught up in a rage, they forced Jesus out of the synagogue and pushed him toward a cliff where they planned to throw him over the edge. By God's grace, Jesus escaped and moved on to the surrounding communities.

Welcome home, Jesus. How did that visit work out for you? Are you sure you want the Spirit of the Lord on you?

There are many fascinating parts to this memorable story. I think you understand why it was included in Luke's gospel soon after Jesus was baptized, and he spent time in the wilderness wrestling with the temptation to take the easy road ahead.

If Jesus' longtime friends and neighbors would turn on him, what else awaited him? Who would be the next to reject him and his message of faith, hope and love?

You know what intrigued me most about this passage as I studied it last week? It was the opening words of the passage Jesus read from Isaiah when the scroll was handed to him.

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me." I am convinced Jesus was not merely voicing the hopes and dreams of a faithful prophet, but telling his hometown friends what he was experiencing on his own spiritual pilgrimage.

The Spirit of the Lord was on him, and he wanted the friends he grew up with to be a part of what God was doing in and through him. Their lack of support at the end of the day had to disappoint him, but thank goodness it did not disillusion him.

In light of this, here is the question I want us to grapple with today. **How do you know when the Spirit of the Lord is upon you?** How do you know when God is preparing you for a service opportunity that could change your life and the lives of those around you? How do you know when God is working with you, leaning on you and nudging you in a new direction?

How did Jesus know? After all, he had a very comfortable life in a great location and could have stayed at the carpenter's shop in Nazareth until he died. Why did he make such an abrupt and radical change in his life?

Evidently, the Spirit of God opened his eyes and stirred his heart to the point he could not remain in the carpenter's shop. So, what did God show him, and what did God ask of him?

God showed Jesus a world full of broken and hurting people whose needs were being ignored by those who had the power and influence to help them. God asked him to leave his comfortable and secure life to become a traveling prophet who offered an alternative vision of what could be if people sought God's will and reflected God's nature. God asked him to walk the dusty, Palestinian roads listening to people's stories so he could respond to them with compassion and give them hope.

"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 and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Clearly, Jesus responded to God's leadership in his life. He hung up his tools in the carpenter's shop for the last time, as difficult and frightening as that must have been, and embraced God's new dream for his life.

"Today," Jesus said...not tomorrow, not next week, not sometime soon, not in the future when things would be less hectic, but today..."this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

I believe what God did in Jesus' life, God wants to do in ours. God yearns to partner with each of us to make hope visible for the people around us who are living in despair.

How do you know, though, when the Spirit of the Lord is upon you? How do you know when God is working with you, leaning on you and nudging you into an area of service that will make your life and the lives around you better?

I think you will know when God does for you what God did for Jesus. When God opens your eyes and stirs your heart, you will know. I did.

My life and ministry changed for the better thirty years ago when I went on my first foreign mission trip. I went to the beautiful African country of Kenya.

I spent two weeks camping out in the bush country where David Aker, the local Associational Missionary, and I walked from village to village getting to know people so we could invite them to a new church that was starting. Along our way and with the help of an interpreter, we listened to people's stories, sharing encouragement, supplies, prayers and the gospel.

Before flying home, I spent a day and night in Nairobi. It was there I encountered abject poverty for the first time. I had never seen anyone live like the thousands of people I saw that day.

Everywhere I looked and as far as I could see, I saw cardboard shacks filled with men, women and children. There was no running water or any semblance of sanitation. Nearby garbage dumps provided what little food people could find.

The number of deaths each day had to be staggering. The amount of violence had to be overwhelming. The level of pain and suffering had to be immeasurable.

I've seen poverty similar to this in other places, and it disturbs me each time I do. This is one reason I have spent the last thirty years mobilizing people to 'give themselves away' so they can help people who have been crushed by the harshness of life.

It is also why I warn people not to go on a mission trip, home or abroad, unless they are prepared to be changed forever. Once you see children foraging through a dump for food, you will never be the same.

Your values and priorities will change. Your attitude will change. Your beliefs will change. Your family life and friendships will change. Your prayers will change. Your sleeping habits will change. Your relationship with God will change.

What you consider important will change. What you live for will change. What you spend your money on will change. How you handle your problems will change. What upsets you will change. What you complain about will change. What you worry about will change. What you are grateful for will change.

Nothing about you will remain the same once your eyes have been opened and your heart has been touched if you listen to the still, small voice of the Spirit. You will be changed for the better and so will the world around you.

What do you think God wants you to see this morning? Is it someone reeling from a mistake who needs help putting the broken pieces of his or her life back together?

Is it someone struggling with an addiction who needs to know someone believes in them?

Is it someone living below the poverty level who needs help paying a bill?

Is it someone fighting a crippling disease that needs encouragement?

Is it someone who has lost their way who needs some good advice?

Is it someone who has been deceived, abused and exploited who needs help climbing out of hell?

Is it someone who has buried a dream who needs encouragement and support?

Is it someone who has been displaced by a tyrant from another country who needs a friendly face to help them find a new and safe place to call home?

Is God tugging on your heart like he did Jesus’? Is God leading you to take some good news to someone who cannot remember the last time they heard anything good?

What keeps you from taking that first step? For what are you waiting?

My favorite word in this passage is the word, ‘today’. I believe Luke liked this word as well by the number of times he included it in his writings. He used this word more than the other three gospel writers combined. They included it in their writings a total of nine times compared to Luke’s twelve.

“Today, in the city of David a Savior has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:11)

“Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house **today.**” (Luke 19:5b)

“Today, salvation has come to your house.” (Luke 19:9a)

“I tell you the truth, **today** you will be with me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)

“Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus said as he concluded the reading from Isaiah.

“Today,” Jesus said...not tomorrow, not next week, not sometime soon, not in the future when things are less hectic, but today...“this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

For Luke, **today** is a day for action. The past cannot be recalled and tomorrow may never come.

Today...what is it time for you to do? Listen to the Spirit. Take the first step.