

Wesley United Methodist Church

January 24, 2016

"Good News."

Luke 4:14-21

The story is told of a Franciscan monk in Australia assigned to be the guide and "gofer" to Mother Teresa when she visited New South Wales. Thrilled and excited at the idea of being so close to this great woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, he never had the opportunity to say one word to Mother Teresa. There were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the Franciscan friar spoke to Mother Teresa: "If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you?" Mother Teresa looked at him. "You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?" she asked. "Yes," he replied. "Then give the money to the poor," she said. "You'll learn more from that than anything I can tell you." Mother Teresa understood that Jesus' ministry was to the poor and she made it hers as well. She knew that they more than anyone else needed good news.

On a Saturday morning, in Nazareth, the town gathered in the synagogue to listen to Jesus read and teach. It was no big surprise. He was well known in the area; it was his home town. He was raised there. They wanted to learn from him. So when he read from the Isaiah scroll, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor" everyone understood these words to be the words of Isaiah.

When Jesus finished that reading he handed the scroll to the attendant and sat down. In that day you sat in the Moses seat to teach the people. Today preachers stand in a pulpit. So, all eyes were on Jesus, waiting for him to begin his teaching. What would he say about this great prophet Isaiah? Would he emphasize the bad news? Israel had sinned and would be taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Or would the emphasis be on the good news? One day God would restore his people and bring them back from captivity. It was Israel's ancient history but it still spoke volumes.

Now here is the wonderful twist, the thing that catches everyone off guard that Saturday morning in Nazareth. Jesus does neither. He doesn't emphasize the past. He focuses on the present. He doesn't lift up Isaiah as the great role model. He lifts up himself. That is what upsets everybody in the synagogue. It's why everybody was furious with him and drove him out of town. They were going to kill him. He dared to say these great words of Isaiah were really about himself. "Today," he said, "this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

I would like to take a look at the ministries of Isaiah and Jesus. Why are their ministries so closely tied and why does Jesus describe himself as fulfilling Isaiah's ministry?

Isaiah lived 700 years before Christ and was a prophet during the reign of King Hezekiah. He spent most of his life in Jerusalem. His wasn't a ministry to be proud to fulfill. His ministry was to proclaim the awful judgment that would be brought upon Israel and any nation that defies God. But there was more. His message was to add salt to the wound because God was going to use the wicked kingdom of Assyria and Babylon to destroy his people and take them into captivity and slavery. Isaiah called that day "the Day of the Lord." So next time you hear that phrase remember that it's not a good thing.

That wasn't all Isaiah said. It's true that he told them they would be destroyed. But he also preached a message of restoration. He stood on the steps of the temple in Jerusalem and told them there was hope. There would be a year of jubilee. There would come a time when God would forgive. Listen to Isaiah's words in chapter 14: "The Lord will have compassion on Israel; once again he will choose his people and settle them in their own land...And the house of Israel will possess the nations." (Is.14:1-2)

Let's not forget that God is a Holy God and he must punish rebellious people but he will also redeem them. Now with this in mind, listen to what Isaiah tells the people in chapter 61, "The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me to preach good news to the poor...bind up the brokenhearted...proclaim freedom for captives...and release the prisoners from darkness." Do you hear the message? It's God redeeming his people from captivity.

Isaiah had a name for this day. He called it, "Year of the Lord's favor." This is a good thing. Next time you hear it be glad.

Let's take a look at Jesus' ministry. When Jesus sits down in the Moses seat and begins his sermon he applies Isaiah's words to himself. But there is one thing more. Jesus isn't proclaiming restoration; Jesus intends on fulfilling that restoration. He's going to complete the work that Isaiah left undone.

Let's stop here for a minute and ask a question. It's the question we asked at the beginning. Why does Jesus describe himself as fulfilling Isaiah's ministry? How is Jesus going to finish or complete Isaiah's work? Wasn't the work already fulfilled when Israel was redeemed and brought out of Babylonian captivity? The answer is Yes, in a manner of speaking. They even rebuilt their Temple that had been destroyed in the war. We can read about it in the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

So how is Jesus fulfilling it? Here it is...now don't miss this: God said it is through suffering of the servant that salvation in its fullest sense would be realized. Israel would have to suffer before he could be redeemed. Here is how Isaiah described the redemptive nature of Israel's suffering:

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.

Like one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way;

and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

By now you recognize that these words are descriptive of Jesus' suffering. And they are.

But they were the first description of what Israel had to endure before she could be redeemed.

I can't help but wonder what it is that Jesus saw on the day he began his ministry. Looking out at those gathered in the synagogue, he saw that the people needed redemption. Listen to the words: "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.

The good news is: This is the year of the Lord's favor. This is the Good News. Praise God. Amen.