

Psalm 71:1-6

In you, O LORD, I take refuge;

let me never be put to shame.

²In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;

incline your ear to me and save me.

³Be to me a rock of refuge,

a strong fortress, to save me,

for you are my rock and my fortress.

⁴Rescue me, O my God,

from the hand of the wicked,

from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

⁵For you, O Lord, are my hope,

my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

⁶Upon you I have leaned from my birth;

it was you who took me from my mother's womb.

My praise is continually of you

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "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,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³ He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’” ²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. ²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; ²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. ²⁷ There were also many lepers^[a] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. ²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. ³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

Let us pray

One of the first things I learned about this church was your mission statement: Glorify and Enjoy God, Make Disciples, Serve Human Need. In it, I heard echoes of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the Great Commission, and Matthew 25. On our website, it's boiled down to three words: Worship, Grow, Serve. Better for a logo, perhaps, but missing the language that makes it so specific to who we are: joy is central to who we are as a church, love in discipleship is a collective journey, human need grounds us in our humble mission work – right here, right now. You revealed a lot about yourself by this simple statement, and I wanted to meet you and figure out if you meant it.

Mission statements reveal a lot. In this season of Epiphany, we're going into each lectionary passage and asking: What does God reveal about God's self in this story?

In today's reading, God reveals Jesus' mission statement. The sermon Jesus preaches to the synagogue in Nazareth sets the tone for the rest of the book of Luke. It tells you why Jesus is here. It ought to be one of the most famous well-loved, most often memorized passages of Scripture, right there next to John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever would believe in him would not perish, but have everlasting life." We should know it like we know Matthew 28:19-20. "Go and make disciples of every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all I've commanded, and surely I will be with you to the very end of the age."

Luke 4:18-19 should be as familiar as Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd,” and the 10 Commandments, “You shall have no other God’s before me,” and The Lord’s Prayer “Thy Kingdom Come.” This is the sermon Jesus preaches.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me: because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God 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...today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The sermon Jesus preaches should be front and center in our understanding of Jesus, Jesus’ mission, and our ongoing mission alongside our Messiah. Instead, all too often, we take the sermon Jesus preaches and we sanitize it, we avoid it, or we get defensive about it.

Christian ethicist, Robert Parham writes, “Luke 4:18-19 is one of the most ignored, watered down, spiritualized or glossed-over texts in many...pulpits, evading or emptying Jesus’ first statement of his moral agenda...Jesus said the gospel was for the poor and oppressed, speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized – impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down, instituting the year of Jubilee! when crushing debts were forgiven and slaves were freed.” How do we make it so this text doesn’t have the kind of power a mission statement, a call to action, ought to carry? We make it all Jesus’ job. Jesus has come to bring forgiveness: that’s the good news. Jesus has come to release people from a spiritual prison, and, ultimately, only Jesus can do that.

As one colleague put it, “To those eyes who have been blinded to the reality of God in their midst, Jesus will provide sight.” We further sanitize it: though Jesus proclaims “the year of the Lord’s favor,” we say that’s just a metaphor. Every fifty years was “the year of the Lord’s favor: the fields rested and were reinvigorated for future harvests...depts were forgiven. People returned home. Slaves were set free. But we say Jesus’ ministry is “like” that year of jubilee. We take his statement and we make it into a simile. We read his sermon and we understand it through a spiritual lens instead of an embodied reality. That’s not to say that Jesus doesn’t bring forgiveness, or that Jesus doesn’t open metaphorically blind eyes: but throughout the gospel of Luke-Acts, we see actual blind people gaining their sight, we see actual prisoners being set free, we see actual poor, afflicted outcasts being lifted up, listened to, loved upon, and provided for.

As the late Desmond Tutu once said, “the good news to a hungry person is bread.” The moment we make the gospel all spiritual and not also physical, we render it inaccessible and irrelevant to the very people we have been sent to love.

But it’s far more comfortable to sanitize, or even avoid the sermon Jesus preaches because, lets be honest, it sounds pretty political. The poor get good news, no questions asked? They didn’t have to earn it first? The people society locks up get a second chance? The people with disabilities get special attention? The oppressed people under the knee of other powerful people get to breathe? That sounds pretty political.

I've heard, since arriving here, more than one beloved member of this congregation warn me not to preach politics from the pulpit. I had multiple different professors tell me that you should never know for whom a Presbyterian pastor votes. There is wisdom in these words: I never want anyone to come to church and be made to feel they do not belong because their politics do not match the politics of the loudest people in leadership. God does not belong to a political party. But, beloved, following Jesus is political. The sermon Jesus preaches is about structures of power, it's about distribution of resources, it's about prioritization of the oppressed. When Jesus evokes the year of the Lord's favor, he is bringing to mind policies of land and money, debt and slavery, revival and revolution. That sounds pretty political. If Jesus was our guest preacher today, we might say, "Hey. Keep it spiritual not physical, keep it biblical not political."

But Jesus was preaching his mission statement! His purpose! And it has everything to do with the systems of power set up by people, in other words, politics. And we don't want to hear it. Isn't it ironic that one of the most popular Christian books on purpose published in my life time, "The Purpose Driven Life" by Rick Warren, doesn't even quote Jesus' sermon, Jesus' mission statement, Jesus' purpose in his driven life? Y'all, we don't like the sermon Jesus' preaches.

We sanitize it, we avoid it, or, perhaps, like the people who first heard it in Nazareth, we get defensive about it. Listen to this passage from their perspective. It starts out okay for Jesus. He's back home where he has routines and customs; he goes to the synagogue where the community gathers to hear scripture read and hear a sermon and pray.

He's welcome there, a hometown hero, and he gets to read and speak and "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." He begins to speak, and they spoke well of him. But then, Jesus really gets preaching. The people in Nazareth have been waiting for the Messiah for so long: they've been waiting for their vindication. They've been bullied by Rome and by the other conquerors of the land of milk and honey for so long, that when they hear these passages in Isaiah about restoration and freedom, they hear those passages believing they are exclusively for them. But the sermon Jesus preaches makes it clear: no, it's not all about you.

They hear Jesus won't be doing miracles here in Nazareth. They hear Jesus won't be saving God's good news only for the chosen people. They hear Jesus preaches that there have been hints throughout scripture of God's ultimate intention: Elijah and the widow at Zarephath, Elisha and the leper Naaman. These stories show God's will in the world is that everyone will be saved. The good news is not exclusive, it's expansive. And the arc of scripture shows that inclusion growing and growing. But some people, when their world view is that God blesses them especially, and they hear that, actually God wants to bless everyone, instead of rejoicing in the generosity and welcome of a loving God, they become "filled with rage." As soon as they hear "it's not all about you" they lash out.

There is a toxic “us vs. them” instinct that all too easily can fester in any religion. Jesus came home to call it out, even in his hometown, and they tried to hurl him off a cliff. I really can’t say if I would’ve done much better if my own worldview had been similarly shattered that day. “But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

That’s the thing, whether we sanitize, avoid, or get defensive over the sermon Jesus preaches, Jesus is going to keep preaching. Jesus is going to keep living out his mission. And, as we read throughout Luke, Jesus is going to keep inviting us, his disciples, to join in.

Jesus shows us how to bring good news to the poor: by providing for them as well as telling them they are loved by God. Jesus shows us how to set the captives free: we’re supposed to visit them, we’re supposed to listen to them, and upon listening to them, you often start to question if they should be imprisoned at all. (And that has been the beginning of many a kingdom-of-God-revealing endeavor.) Jesus showed us how to bring sight to the blind, prioritizing their needs, giving them access in society, listening to what they asked for. Perhaps you and I have not been given the gift of miracle healing, but we can listen to our disabled siblings and make sure we are making our worlds fairer and more accessible to all God’s beloved children: that’s its own kind of modern miracle.

Jesus shows us how to let the oppressed go free: he seeks out the people the world tries to silence and he defends them: in his time and context, those people were women and Samaritans and gentiles and sick people and poor people. In our time and context, we still see some overlap in those who our world still oppresses, but there are also communities in our time that I believe Jesus would prioritize based off of how our society tries to push them to the side: members of the gay community, indigenous people, immigrants, and black people. The sermon Jesus preaches prioritizes people who suffer at the hands of an unjust society, even at the perceived expense of people society favors. But the sermon Jesus preaches teaches us that the good news is first and foremost for people who live life deprived of the goodness God initially meant for everyone to have.

The hard truth is that the good news doesn't sound good to the hoarders of wealth and comfort. The good news doesn't sound like good news to people who are happy without hearing it.

So what do we do with that? Well, for one thing, we aren't surprised when our attendance numbers are low. As a college kid, I was instantly suspicious of any church that was actually popular, because, to me, that says they're preaching and teaching something that fits in with the culture today: something that affirms consumerism and rugged individualism, or scares and manipulates people into their seats, or simply gives the people what they want. I'm convinced that the mission statement of Jesus Christ, the sermon that Jesus preaches would rile up a mob in most popular churches.

Because if we actually heard Jesus' mission statement and followed Jesus in his mission, we might end up worse off by the world's standards than what we were before. So this stuff, preached rightly, should not be popular. But that's if you follow the world's standards of success instead of Jesus' standards.

Jesus says in the sermon Jesus preaches: Today. Today. Today! this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. That means the standards here are different. That means there is a Kingdom of Heaven, a Kingdom of God that has been established through Christ. There is a place where the standards of success are not money or power or control.

The standards of "success" in the Kingdom of Heaven are joy and humility and love. And if we decide not to sanitize, avoid or get defensive over the sermon Jesus preaches, if, instead, we decide to listen to the mission statement and adopt it as our own, through the power of the Holy Spirit we get to participate in the revealing of this Kingdom where the poor have good news, the captives have release, the blind have sight, the oppressed have freedom. We get to serve human need, sacrificing our own wealth and comfort, and revealing the Reign of God in the world Today. I hope we listen to the sermon Jesus preaches.

Let it be so, Lord. Let it be so.