**Third Sunday after Epiphany**

**Sunday January 23, 2022**

**“The Mission of the Messiah” (Luke 4:14-21)**

The church must always be mindful of its true purpose and mission in the world if it is to remain faithful to God. Amidst our ever-changing world, filled with many competing voices, it’s easy for us to get diverted and distracted. At the same time, it’s natural for us to get anxious about the future of the church, given the steady decline of church attendance in Canada and the Western world. In our desperation, we look for quick fixes, snazzy gimmicks, and simple answers for the considerable challenges that we face. In times like these it’s helpful to reflect on and learn from the One who had a strong sense of mission and a deep dependence upon God. This morning’s Scripture lesson from Luke’s Gospel portrays our Lord at the very beginning of his earthly ministry as he describes the nature of his messianic mission in the world.

The account of Jesus’ visit to his hometown at the start of his public ministry sets the stage for much that follows in the Gospel. Several themes within this passage will be expanded upon as the Gospel unfolds. At the same time, this passage presents an important introduction to Jesus. Luke begins with the story of Jesus’ birth and because of this, the reader already knows a great deal about him. For instance, the birth narratives reveal that Jesus is God’s Son, the promised Davidic Messiah, and the Savior of the world (1:32-33; 2:11; 30-32). However, the question remained as to what kind of Messiah he would be, and this passage brings a lot of clarity in this regard.

After his baptism in the Jordan (3:21-22) and his temptation in the wilderness (4:1-12), Jesus “*returned to Galilee, filled with the Holy Spirit’s power*” (4:14). This opening verse indicates the locale of the initial phase of Jesus’ ministry, the region of Galilee, the part of the Holy Land where he grew up. But more importantly, it establishes Jesus as one who relied upon the power of God’s Spirit for ministry. This is the first lesson that we can learn from this passage. *The role of the Holy Spirit is vital to mission for without God’s power within us, we’ll be unable to accomplish his will in the world*.

The presence of God’s Spirit was central to the life of Jesus. In the birth narrative, the angel reported to Mary that “*The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the* *Most High will overpower you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God*” (1:35). At Jesus’ baptism, heaven opened and “*the Holy Spirit descended on him*” (3:21-22). The opening verse of the temptation account reads, “*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness*” (4:1). Finally, Jesus’ public ministry was launched in the power of the Holy Spirit (4:14). All of this increases the significance of the words from the Isaiah scroll, which Jesus read in the synagogue that day.

Luke 4:14-15 nicely summarizes the opening phase of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee. At first his ministry seemed to be going well. He was popular throughout the region and his sermons in the synagogues were admired by the masses. But when he returned to his hometown of Nazareth he faced skepticism, criticism, and hostility (4:22-30). But we’ll get to that next week. For now, the focus of our attention is upon the first part of this passage, which establishes the events leading up to the people’s negative reaction. The story begins with Jesus’ visit to his hometown of Nazareth and since it was the Sabbath he went to the village synagogue, the communal place of worship for Jewish people (4:16). There, he was given a biblical scroll and he read aloud the morning Scripture lesson (4:17). By divine design, that morning reading was from Isaiah 61:1-2, a passage that wonderfully describes the nature of Jesus’ messianic mission. Jesus stressed this to the people when he declared to them, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”* (4:21). Jesus’ point was clear, his life, ministry, and mission fulfilled Isaiah’s prophetic words.

The first words from the Isaiah passage reinforce the essential connection between Jesus’ mission and presence of the Holy Spirit. “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,”* Jesus said, *“because he has anointed me.”* (4:18). Up to this point Luke has made it very evident that God’s Spirit was upon Jesus, directing his life and empowering his ministry. The Isaiah reading was a public declaration of the nature of his messianic mission, emphasizing to the people that it would be Spirit-guided and Spirit-empowered. Furthermore, through the presence of the Spirit, Jesus was *anointed* for his mission in the world. The remainder of the Isaiah quotation would enlarge upon the key features of his mission.

Guided, empowered, and anointed by God’s Spirit, Jesus was on a mission *to bring good news to the poor* (4:18). The message of the gospel is good news for the world, but especially the *marginalized*. While we define the *poor* exclusively in terms of a person’s economic situation, in Jesus’ world, this term referred to a wide range of factors that might place a person on the edge of society. Factors such as a person’s education level, gender, family background, religious purity, social status, or vocation could affect one’s status within the community. In Jesus’ day, people were easily pigeon-holed into the convenient categories of insider and outsider. Yet Jesus emerged on the scene, prepared to upset the apple cart of social norms, and reach out to those considered to be beyond the pale of proper society. His task was to communicate through word and deed that even these “*outsiders”* are loved by God and are recipients of divine grace and favor. This is the second lesson that this passage provides for us. *The church’s mission is to bring good news to the marginalized.* Those at the fringes of our community come in different forms. They are those facing poverty, mental illness, addiction, or discrimination. They are people on the margins of the Christian faith for one reason or another. Perhaps they had a negative experience with organized religion and are turned off church. Maybe they are those who have intellectual objections to the Christian faith and feel that they are at odds with Christianity. Maybe they are folks who don’t see the need to belong to a community of faith. Or maybe they are people who have the real sense that they’ll never quite fit within the church. Whatever the reason for a person’s alienation from God, we are the bearers of the good news that no one is beyond the pale of God’s love. Taking our cue from Jesus, we need to step out of our comfort zone and reach out to those on the outside of our community.

Another key part of Jesus’ mission was to bring freedom to those who were imprisoned or oppressed. According to the Isaiah quote, “*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”* (4:18). The people that Jesus encountered in his earthly ministry were held captive by many different things. Some were weighed down by debilitating illnesses and others were controlled by evil spiritual forces. In the passages that follow we can observe Jesus setting people free from demonic control (4:31-37) and from illnesses (4:38-41). Our Lord brought healing and wholeness to people whose physical bodies were broken and in Jesus’ name we are called to go and do likewise. Yet the freedom that Jesus brings is not only physical, but also spiritual. Many people are imprisoned by sin, and they need to experience the forgiveness and liberation from sin that Jesus offers them. While this talk of *sin* is somewhat outdated and unpopular in our modern culture, sin is still very real and relevant in our world. Many people are caught in a cycle of negative and hurtful thoughts, actions, and attitudes and feel that they are unable to break free. The good news is that Jesus offers forgiveness and the way of freedom from the chains of sin. This is the third lesson that this passage provides for us. *The church’s mission is to proclaim freedom for the captives.* Yet we do this in a way that is not condescending or antagonistic toward others, but with a humble and compassionate attitude for we are all spiritually blind in one way or another and in deep need of the light of Christ to shatter our darkness.

In this new year of ministry, let’s earnestly seek to engage in God’s mission in our world. Like Jesus, let’s *“proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (4:19). While the prospect of God’s judgment is real and cannot be overlooked, all too often it becomes the starting point of our conversation with the outside world. Instead, may our words and actions reflect the wonderful grace of God that is freely given to all for this is the good news of the gospel. As we try to find our way in this confusing and challenging world, let’s learn from our Lord and continue the mission that he initiated.

Let’s follow the Messiah on his mission. A mission that is Spirit-directed and Spirit-empowered. A mission that brings good news to the marginalized. A mission that proclaims liberation for the captive. A mission that declares the Lord’s favor upon a broken world.