

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 19, 2025

God's Vision

Luke 4:14-21

The synagogue sign proudly announced, THIS WEEK'S GUEST PREACHER: JESUS. Attendance was up that day in Nazareth when our Lord delivered his first sermon in the community where he had been brought up. Many of the people in the pews already knew him. He was a hometown boy, one of their own. And now here he was, all grown up, reading Scripture in public, interpreting the word of God for the people of God. According to Luke's description, the message wasn't very long. It reads like more of a mini-sermon. Just a couple of verses from Isaiah, then some brief commentary. Now don't get any ideas. Just because Jesus kept his message that short doesn't mean that we contemporary preachers need to shrink the sermon down to five minutes or less.

I once drove by a church whose sign advertised a "Short Service." It lasted from 9:15-9:55 AM. Sounds like they had worship down to forty minutes. Or if you prefer a longer gathering, after Sunday School there was a service that began at 11:00 AM and lasted until 12:30 PM. By my calculations, that's more than double the time of the express worshipers. Based on Luke's summary of congregational worship, maybe Jesus' message would have fit more comfortably into the Nazareth assembly's "Short Service."

Actually, it took a few moments for Jesus' listeners just to recover from his opening statement. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). According to Luke, the first public word of Jesus, apart from reading Scripture, is "today." Something is here now that wasn't here before. And that something, says Jesus, is the kingdom, the reign of God, the time when God's promises are being fulfilled and God's purposes are coming to fruition. The time when God's agenda for his people and for the world gets implemented. A time when the sick get healed. A time when the blind get to see. A time when the deaf get to hear. A time when the hungry get fed. A time when the economically disadvantaged get raised up. A time when the financially dominant get brought down. A time when those who have been mistreated, neglected, or discriminated against get justice. A time when all those who are oppressed, in whatever form, get set free. "Today" is the time, says Jesus. Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Today.

I once took this Isaiah passage that Jesus read and carried it with me into some nursing home visitation. I sat on the bed beside two roommates who sat in their wheelchairs. One of them struggled to see because of some vision issues. The other struggled to speak because of what appeared to be the effects of a stroke. As I got ready to leave, I could tell that she was making every effort possible just to form a word, just to be able to tell me her name. But before I left, we opened the Scriptures to hear from the God who knows their names and their circumstances. "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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (vv. 18-19). The words of Isaiah that became the words of our Lord, who spoke his living word into that nursing home room where two precious women could claim the liberating reality of the kingdom, even in the midst of suffering and affliction.

Where would Jesus have learned to quote these Scriptures and talk this way? Where would he have learned about announcing this kind of news? Maybe partly, as one person has suggested, from his mother. Come to think of it, the language of Jesus' first sermon does sound familiar. The tone, the topics, and the issues echo Mary's earlier declaration about what God is up to in the world. Remember how Mary started singing after Gabriel told her about the child being formed in her womb. "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. . . . He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers" (Luke 1:46-48a, 52-55). Mary knows firsthand what it's like to experience God's favor. And now, through her son, God's people, and the whole world, will also know.

So when Jesus addresses the congregation in Nazareth, he isn't making a campaign speech. He doesn't need to run for office. He's already been appointed, or better yet, anointed, by God. He's the promised one, the Messiah, the Savior sent from God to set things right in a lost and broken world. So what Jesus says to the assembled worshipers is less of a victory speech or State of the Union address and more of an inaugural address. Jesus uses language from the prophet Isaiah to lay out God's vision of the world, of human society, as God intends it to be. This is our Lord's manifesto.

This prophetic picture of God's purpose certainly includes his judgment upon our sin and his opposition to our unrighteousness. But the picture goes beyond judgment, for through this judgment comes something new, a transformed way of living together as human beings, a way that embodies God's righteousness and steadfast love. In other words, when Jesus stands before his hometown congregation, reads Isaiah, and then says that what the prophet pointed to is now becoming a reality, in their time and place, our Lord is putting God's dream before the people.

As we approach tomorrow's observance of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, it's appropriate that we remember his most famous speech, delivered on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. Remember that, as one activist has noted, it wasn't the "I Have a Complaint" speech. It was the "I Have a Dream" speech.¹ King was standing in the prophetic biblical tradition when he called our attention to and spoke about the injustices in our nation, and the long list of complaints that black Americans rightfully had. But King didn't just take the podium to offer a critique or voice dissent. He stood up to proclaim a positive vision, a dream of what could happen if our country lived up to and grew further into the convictions and promises on which it was founded. Martin Luther King knew that the work of God is about more than just announcing what's wrong. It's most of all about articulating a vision of what's right, in God's sight.

When Jesus came to the front of the synagogue that day in Nazareth, he didn't just read the Scripture text, hand the scroll back to the attendant, and say, "Today, I have a complaint." No, it was more like, "Today, I have a dream. It's not a new dream. It's an old dream that goes back to Isaiah and beyond. It's God's dream. It's what God has always wanted and intended, for his people, and for the world. It's not a fuzzy, nebulous wish about what's possible if we in the human race will just get our act together and redouble our efforts to fix everything that's wrong on this planet." No, Jesus' message was about how the fixing of the world was already underway. It was a fixing that could only come from God's side, and it was happening in and through himself. "The Spirit of the Lord is on me," says Jesus. So God's reign, his mission of liberation, doesn't come primarily as a package of proposals or a strategic plan for revolutionizing society. God's agenda comes as saving grace in the

form of Jesus. And what Jesus says in the synagogue at Nazareth becomes the blueprint for what unfolds in the rest of Luke's Gospel. The healing, the feeding, the caring, the preaching, the teaching, the peace-making. All the things that happen in and through the ministry of Jesus and his disciples are the ways that his first sermon gets unpacked at ground level in the lives of people who need the restoring mercy of God.

You and I weren't there at the synagogue that day. But this good news that Jesus announced wasn't just for them. In fact, if you look at the passage immediately following today's text, you'll see that preaching about just how expansive God's reign really is got Jesus into major trouble, to the point where the hometown congregation wanted to kill him. But the fact is, if it weren't for this boundary-breaking Savior, with this inclusive gospel, you and I wouldn't be sitting here today as redeemed people in the community of God's people. We ourselves have encountered saving grace. But as preacher Timothy Keller puts it, "In the mind of the Old Testament prophets as well as the teaching of Jesus, an encounter with grace inevitably leads to a life of justice."²

This life of caring for and taking up the cause of the poor, the weak, the lost, and the vulnerable is driven by God's agenda as laid out in Jesus' sermon. As I mentioned, God's agenda then gets enacted through the life and ministry of Jesus. Most of all, God's agenda gets implemented through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who takes upon himself the weight of our sins, our unjust lives, reconciles us to God, and makes us into the kind of people who show forth his righteousness to the world.

We're still living into that mission. And as we do so, we reflect an experience that scholar N. T. Wright talks about in his book, *Simply Christian*. He writes:

I had a dream the other night, a powerful and interesting dream. And the really frustrating thing is that I can't remember what it was about. I had a flash of it as I woke up, enough to make me think how extraordinary and meaningful it was; and then it was gone Our passion for justice often seems like that. We dream the dream of justice. We glimpse, for a moment, a world at one, a world put to rights, a world where things work out, where societies function fairly and efficiently. . . and then we wake up and come back to reality.

True, we often fail to pursue the justice and peace God's kingdom. But we still know what God has already accomplished through Christ, and what God has promised when Christ comes again, and all the brokenness of this world is set right. As Wright puts it, "Christians believe this is so because all humans have heard, deep within themselves, the echo of a voice which calls us to live [with a dream for justice]. And [followers of Christ] believe that in Jesus that voice became human and did what had to be done to bring it about."³

Luke says that "[Jesus] rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." May God sustain us in our commitment to his vision, our devotion to his dream, and our allegiance to his agenda. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us to proclaim good news.

¹ Jim Wallis, "I Have a Complaint'—No—'I Have a Dream.'" SoJoMail. <http://go.sojonet/site/MessageViewer?em_id=32521.0&dlv_id=39702>.

² Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead, 2010) 49.

³ N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) 3-13.