

Luke 4:14-21

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

'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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

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. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'*

Reviving the Soul - January 23, 2022

Luke 4:14-21

So here we are, gathered online once again to worship God. On the one hand, we can be grateful that we are indeed able to meet electronically, albeit imperfectly. There is no way Zoom can come close to replicating in-person worship. At the same time, as long as Covid remains a threat to us, our attempts at in-person worship are equally imperfect. When we've been able to meet in person, only a small group has felt comfortable attending and many, if not most, have remained on Zoom.

The good news is that despite our limitations, we have still been able to add new worshippers and even children in our Sunday school. There is a thirst for God's Word that a virus cannot quench.

I, of course, cannot blame people for wanting to stay safe. And our zoom cast is hardly as technically good as even the simplest TV broadcast. There are very legitimate reasons for staying away from worship at this point. However, we have faith that we can and will be together once more.

Indeed, being together is integral to our mission, our function, as the Church of Jesus Christ. There is no substitute for human contact, human interaction, mutual human support — all of which can happen when we worship together in person. We can read scripture to ourselves. We can participate in our Daily Prayer Services. We can be part of a Bible Study. But there is something about gathering with other believers in person that makes the Word just that much more personal, just that much more meaningful.

Certainly hearing the Word proclaimed was more than meaningful to those who gathered in a synagogue in Nazareth 2000 years ago to hear from their hometown boy, their fellow congregant. I'm speaking of course about the person they knew as Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary. They knew Jesus well. They knew his family. They watched him grow up. So when Jesus sat before them to read and interpret the words of the prophet Isaiah, their collective reaction was akin to the way we feel when we see our neighbor's children performing onstage or at some sort of athletic competition. "There he is... isn't he so handsome, all grown up!" Or "I remember when he first started coming here." Or "It's too bad Joseph isn't here, rest his soul, I know he would be so proud!" Sound familiar?

So here is Jesus' extended family, gathered at worship, anticipating a nice simple message from their collective son. And what does Jesus do? He does what all preachers of the Word have been doing for thousands of year. He opened the scriptures, he read a passage to the people, and he spoke.

Now at this point, most sermons on this scripture would go into an analysis of what Jesus said next to the people. After all, this passage from Isaiah is considered Jesus' "mission statement" — the list of

things he believed he was sent to do. Jesus said he was sent “to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, let the oppressed go free, and proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Each section of this scripture is full of meaning and I could easily spend not one but many sermons unpacking the significance of these words. Jesus task on earth was formidable and while he certainly was able to start fulfilling each of the things Isaiah said he would do, he only made a small dent. Indeed it is up to us, the church, to continue slowly and ever so slowly to keep making progress little by little to achieve Jesus’ mission. We have made some progress, certainly. However, as this week’s vote in the US suppressing the voting rights of mostly poor and non-white individuals demonstrates, we have a very long way to go. Perhaps our nation is even on the verge of lurching backwards into a semi-authoritarian state. Time will tell.

No, my purpose today is not to elaborate on Jesus’ mission, but rather to point out that Jesus quoted scripture to lay the foundation for his work. Something we tend to forget nowadays is that every significant achievement in human history that has made life better for people is firmly rooted in the Bible. I’ll repeat, if you look at the history of human efforts to advance the causes of freedom, equality, and caring for the environment, you will find that the founders of these movements were all inspired by scripture.

Let me share a few examples. Certainly one of the earliest examples of citing Scripture as the basis for changing human life is found in the anti-slavery movement. Slavery is mentioned frequently in the Bible. It was part of the human condition. Each of the founders of the Israelites: Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and Joseph either possessed slaves themselves or, in the case of Joseph, was a slave. The children of Israel were slaves in Egypt. All the kings of Israel and Judah had slaves. Jesus talked about slaves and slavery not to condemn it, but to mention slaves as part of his storytelling. The apostle Paul told slaves who were believers to serve their masters faithfully.

Nonetheless, several hundred years ago, Christian leaders began to pay more attention to how they interpreted scripture. They were especially bothered by the passages in Genesis that said all human beings were made in the “image of God.” For them, it seems clear that if all of us were made in the image of God, slavery was impossible. How could one human being own another? Moreover, in reexamining Jesus’ teachings and ministry, it was clear that many of the people he healed and helped were not rich and powerful, but those on the outside of society. Increasingly it became clear to more and more Christian leaders that God could not be for the institution of slavery — and by the nineteenth century, it was churches that took the lead in the abolitionist movement. Moreover, as

more African-Americans learned to read and study the Bible themselves, they were inspired by Moses leading the children of Israel out of slavery. They were able to inspire each other that God opposed slavery and thus to fight to end it was a truly Holy cause. Leaders from Harriet Tubman to Martin Luther King, Jr. found courage and inspiration in the Bible to fuel their passion for civil rights and equal treatment.

When the American Revolution was in its early stages, back in the 1760's it again was ministers, Presbyterian ministers in particular, who found that that scripture condemned bad and evil rulers and promised that God would remove them. They used scripture to counter the idea that all kings, good and bad, were appointed by God and therefore must be obeyed at all times. Friends, as I hope you know, the highest governing body of our Presbyterian denomination is called the General Assembly. It is no coincidence that the legislatures of New Jersey and Pennsylvania are also called the General Assembly. Once again, segments of the church took the lead in using scripture to bring about change.

More recently, the book of Genesis has been a powerful tool for the environmental movement in our nation. Passages from Genesis that call on human beings to care for creation are used to show that we are to work in harmony with what God has created, not to selfishly abuse it. Scripture has given encouragement to many people fighting to preserve and restore the environment.

For each one of us, there comes a time when we have to face ourselves honestly and decide who we are and what we truly believe. Now I'll admit that for many of us, it is easier to just go along with the crowd. None of us has the time or knowledge to think about and take a stand on every issue that faces us personally or as a community or nation. We all rely to some extent on the opinions of people we know and respect. We all derive some of our personal beliefs from our parents, partners, or other close relatives. It is often hard to break from our family's traditions and ideas so for the sake of internal peace within the family, we will just go along.

But while going along is convenient and may result in less acrimony at family gatherings, blindly clinging to the teachings of friends and family without really digging into not only what they believe but why they believe it will ultimately create friction and tension within ourselves.

If we just go along with the way things are, if we just accept the status quo, then eventually, we will encounter situations where the teachings and opinions of other simply conflict with our personal observations and experiences. How long have women, for example, been taught that they are inferior to men? Probably since human beings have been around. But now, more and more women observe for themselves how ridiculous the idea is that men are inherently superior. Little by little we see

women claiming equal rights for themselves because deep down they know they are equal and God agrees.

Friends, we should take time from our busy lives and write down a few ideas or beliefs that are very important to us. Then, for each of these beliefs, we should figure out why we believe what we believe and whether that makes sense or not. And if it doesn't make sense, we have to ask ourselves why we are going along with false ideas.

Jesus rooted his beliefs and actions in Scripture. Throughout his ministry, when he was accused of violating God's law, he stated that he did not come to overthrow the law, but to fulfill it. In other words, Jesus made scripture his foundation, regardless of what the religious leaders of his day felt.

That, sisters and brothers, is why we study scripture. That is why we have a Bible Study every week. I dare assert that there is not a better foundation on which to build your personal belief system than the words recorded in the Bible. Yes, it is complex. Yes, it sometimes seems contradictory. Yes, good Christians can read the exact same passage and reach differing conclusions about what it means. However, if you don't bother to pick up the Bible and read it for yourself and get with a group to share and discuss what it says, then you won't even know what a great and wonderful resource it is.

Does that mean I'm right all the time in what my interpretation is and how I teach? Of course not. However, the beauty of studying scripture together is that many minds can bring perspectives others have not considered. Moreover, because we believe the Holy Spirit dwells in all of us, God's spirit does speak to us and does help us to understand scripture. However, if we never open the Bible in the first place, we will never know what it says and thus be subject to the opinions of others.

What do we believe and why do we believe it? Such is a fundamental question of life. In Psalm 19, it is written, "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul." I ask you, what other source do we have that is capable of reviving our souls? Yes, the beauty of nature can inspire us. Yes, the cry of baby can remind us of the precious gift of life. Yes, the speeches and sacrifices of leaders like King, Mandela, and Mother Teresa should be provide indispensable guidance for us.

Yet the source, the core, the essence behind all of this is the scripture that blesses, inspires, and encourages us 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.

Let scripture be your foundation and let it revive your soul!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.