

January 20, 2019

Luke 4:14-21, *The Message Bible*

Let me set the stage for you to help us understand today's Bible text:

Jesus comes back to his hometown after he seemingly has made a name for himself in his county, Galilee. Now, Jesus, the hometown boy made good, is not exactly from the best, first family of Nazareth. He is, in fact, from a carpenter's family, which we know now meant he was pretty much from near the bottom of the economic barrel in Nazareth. And Nazareth is not exactly a shining example of urban elegance; in fact, it is a pretty backwater town in the backwater region of Galilee. So Jesus is an unlikely person to be "famous" or "acceptable".

We also know that, for many of Jesus' fellow believers, life in Israel/Judea was very difficult, due to the often cruel Roman occupation. Most of the soldiers were probably not Roman citizens, rather mercenaries from other Roman occupied territories, often from countries near Israel, countries which despised Israel, making many of the occupying soldiers extra cruel.

We know that before, during, and after Jesus' life and death all but one of the armed uprisings against the Roman occupation started in Galilee.

This is the Israel Jesus, the one of questionable acceptability, begins his ministry in. A country divided between the wealthy, who had found a path of peace and appeasement with Roman, and a large group of the poor, who felt, and were, threatened, oppressed, bound, and if not in prison, at least caught in a dead-end street.

It was in this Galilee that Jesus unrolled the scroll and read:

God's Spirit is on me;

God has chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"

Jesus adds, This scripture "came true just now in this place."

Ah, eloquent words, words easy to hear, words that make people hope. But then (and what is not part of today's lesson) people, after the initial euphoria began to wonder how this could all come about through Jesus, Mary's boy, the one they watched grow up. They began to lose faith. And, in the end, the only one to be released was Jesus, when he walked away from the angry crowd unscathed.

This story has always left me wondering. How was the scripture fulfilled? Roman was still there. People were still unfairly treated, in countless ways.

As I struggled to make meaning of this biblical story, I realized there is a present-day story that also leaves me questioning whether or not God's reign is near – that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Last Tuesday would have been Dr. King's 90th birthday. Many believe we have made great strides in race relations since Dr. King's death in 1968, a little over 50 years ago, but I am not so certain. Sure, Dr. King is honored (by some) with a holiday. Sure, Barak Obama was elected president (which sparked a backlash). But my friends tell me about how their children are stopped by police, while driving black; how they are looked at funny if they are in the

“wrong part of town”; how in certain stores people keep an eye on them.

I just finished reading the Biography of Malcolm X, as told to, and then written by, Alex Haley. After reading Malcolm’s life story and his life experiences, in many, many ways it seems to me as if nothing has changed, especially in the last 10 years with the resurfacing of white supremacist groups. And my heart breaks knowing and hearing the pain, suffering, and oppression of so many of my brothers and sisters; and brothers and sisters they are, as we are all children – in every sense – of God; we are one family, whether we like it or not.

It feels, then, like history is repeating itself, over and over again. So how are we to understand Jesus telling his listeners that Isaiah’s prophecy of liberation “came true just now in this place”?

Here is what came to me, as I prayed on this question:

For centuries people read Isaiah and waited for God to send the healing and wholeness, the liberation to them. And, if not God in an earthquake or tornado, then through a new King David, who would lead them to victory – political victory, military victory. They were passively waiting for God’s liberation to flow over them and free them.

Even Jesus’ followers, when they heard these words in Nazareth’s meeting house, and wherever Jesus went after that, were convinced Jesus would take up arms and overthrow Rome. But listen to Jesus’ reading of Isaiah one more time:

“God’s Spirit is on me;

“God has chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,

“Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners

“and recovery of sight to the blind,

“to set the burdened and battered free,

“to announce, ‘This is God’s year to act!’”

Is there a better description of Jesus’ ministry anywhere? This is what Jesus did, and, as the Word of God made flesh, Jesus was revealing how God wanted everybody to live in the world.

Despite the push against him, Jesus preached good news, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, freed those oppressed, lifted burdens. And, Jesus paid a heavy price for his living out Isaiah’s truth. Did the whole world change overnight? No, it didn’t, but Jesus told us, “The poor will be with you always.” We should not be discouraged.

In Jesus, and in those who followed Jesus throughout the millennia, this prophesy of Isaiah has been fulfilled. Every time someone has stood up and spoken truth to power, defended the defenseless, gave vision and hope to both those lost in darkness and those who helped to keep people in the dark, every time Isaiah’s prophesy is being fulfilled. In Dr. King, through his vision, his words, his works, his willingness to push back against the powers at great cost to his own personage, Isaiah’s prophesy was fulfilled.

Today, it is being fulfilled when you and I are willing to say and to live out in our lives the words of Isaiah and Jesus: “God’s Spirit is on me; God has chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind.”

This is our job, as followers of Jesus Christ. I know, you are probably thinking, “Who qualified me?”

Friends, the God's Spirit, Spirit of Love and Mercy and Grace qualifies each person, who desires to follow God's Word made flesh, to follow the one who reveals to us God's call to fullness of life.

Jesus finished with these words of Isaiah: "This is God's year to act!" You and I are God's hands, feet, eyes, voice in this world. This means this is OUR year to act!

I am not Jesus Christ; I am not Dr. King or Malcolm X, or any of a vast number of saints throughout the millennia that have had a major impact on the lives of millions. But, we are all children of God. We have voice, large or small, in our community. The challenge is to grow a faith that is bigger than our fear. The lives of Dr. King and Malcolm X have shown me that they, more than once, faced a crossroads where fear threatened to overwhelm their faith and cause them to retreat. They did not. Thank God!

So, on this weekend when we remember and honor the work, legacy, and person of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., hear anew the words of Isaiah through Jesus to us: "God's Spirit is on us; God has chosen us to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent us to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind."

Friends, "this is God's year to act!" So, whenever and wherever you hear a denigrating word or action, speak in the name of Jesus Christ and say that is not how one speaks to or about a child of God. Where you see a systemic problem that keeps people "burdened and battered", seek to change the system. Do not judge those who are imprisoned, they have already been judged, offer pardon through deeds of love and concern.

When we give of ourselves making Thanksgiving Baskets, giving gloves and hats, or creating health kits, we are preaching "the Message of good news to the poor"; it is a message of love and mercy and grace.

I pray that alongside of this work, we will work diligently to change a system that perpetuates a poverty that makes such giving necessary.

Friends, "this is God's year to act!" Let us do so, filled with the Spirit, in Jesus' name. Amen.