

Good News

Luke 4:14-21

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First Presbyterian, Luling

As an adult, and as we've moved from place to place, I've come to know some farmers and gardeners. I guess I've even come to count myself in their number. They are picky about rain. It has to come in just the right amounts and at just the right time. Most all of them are unified in wanting it to be the slow and steady kind, rather than the downpour kind. Better for the crops.

Now as a child, our extended family was filled with cattle ranchers. I quickly learned that if you're going to hang out with cattle ranchers, you have to appreciate the rain. But they're even more picky about it. If it rains slowly and steadily, it's ok for the grass, but it's not going to fill up the tanks, which are low for this time of year. If it rains too hard, it fills up the tanks but runs off the ground too fast and the cows tear up the pasture. It seems like the perfect rain for both pasture and water supply does not exist. Good news for the pasture was bad news for the tank, and vice versa.

We can kind of understand how good news for one thing isn't always good news for another thing. It's good news for me if I find a bargain price on a pair of jeans, for instance, but it's not such good news if that bargain price means that the people who made the jeans didn't get paid fairly or worked in unsafe conditions. Just because it's good news for me doesn't mean it's good news for everyone.

We encounter Jesus in his hometown synagogue, and at least part of what he says is this. Good news doesn't count as good news, unless it's good news for everyone. Let's take a look and a listen.

It's important, first, that Luke mentions that Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit. Two weeks ago, we overheard and saw what the people may not have been able to hear and see: the Spirit descending like a dove and the voice from heaven saying "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." That Spirit then accompanies Jesus into the wilderness where he withstands the temptations. And then this is the first act of Jesus's public ministry that Luke narrates in any detail. There must have been others, because the people throughout Galilee have begun to hear about him, but this is the first act of consequence. It is a Spirit filled and enabled and encouraged moment.

Luke carefully describes this scene so vividly that we can see it. Hometown

boy, back in the synagogue where he probably learned to read, where he had heard these same Scriptures read and taught, where he was known. It's obvious that the scroll is valuable, given the care with which the attendant and Jesus handle it. He unrolls the scroll and reads. What he reads is a bit of a mashed up version of two different passages in Isaiah, but the message is clear.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed to 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." That hangs in the air for a minute, as Jesus carefully rolls the scroll back up, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down. The custom was for people to stand as the Scriptures were read and then sit down for the teaching, so this is not anything unusual. They're all watching and waiting to see what he will say. And what he says *is* unusual. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It's good news, right? That this scripture that spoke of Israel's longing has been fulfilled today. It's easy to grasp that it is good news for the poor, for those who are captive, who are blind, who are oppressed. And sure, we could make a case that spiritually we are poor; that we're all held captive to something, if only our own desires; that goodness knows we can be spiritually blind; and oppressed by forces that seem strong and out of our control. We could make that case. I could preach that sermon and probably have before.

But this is Luke's gospel. Mary has already proclaimed, clearly, that God will bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly, that God will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. This is Luke's gospel, where Jesus says "Blessed are the poor," not "Blessed are the poor in spirit," as he does in Matthew. I'm pretty sure when Jesus reads from Isaiah and says he has come to bring good news for the poor, that's exactly what he means. Poor, captive, blind, oppressed. Jesus has come to bring good news to them, and very few of us fit in those categories.

However, if it's good news for the poor, then it's good news for everyone. If the poor are lifted up and the "least of these" are taken care of, then it's good for all of us. We're fulfilling our obligations to one another. We're loving our neighbor. If it's good news for the poor, then it's good news for everyone.

I was working at a youth conference a long time ago, and the leaders were all sitting around chatting. We were a pretty homogeneous crowd, mostly from middle class, white families. All of us Presbyterians. Talk turned to snow skiing and how much fun it was. One person said, "Oh, I've never been snow skiing."

Everyone else kind of looked at her like she had blown their minds a bit. She then went on “It’s not something my brother could do, because he has Down’s Syndrome, so it wasn’t ever anything our family was interested in.” Snow skiing wasn’t good news for her brother, so it wasn’t good news for any of them. I’ve remembered that interchange often.

If it isn’t good news for the least of these. If it isn’t good news for those who have little and rarely hear good news, then it isn’t really good news.

What Jesus brings is, though. It is good news. Good news for those who need it most, and therefore good news for all of us.