

Called to Freedom

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Prayer of Illumination

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning:
grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,
that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Background

Jesus didn't go to church. He may have even slept in on Sundays. He certainly didn't read the New Testament...it hadn't been written yet.

But we know this: Jesus was a synagogue going man. It was Jesus' regular practice as a devout Jew to go to synagogue on Saturdays.

The synagogue was a central hub for Jewish life in the 1st century: It was a meeting hall, a place of prayer, and a house of study. Interaction and exchange were encouraged—so anyone could speak up who had something important to share.

The early disciples continued this practice in Acts, where they regularly worshipped in the temple. And we continue this vital spiritual practice, worshipping in the House of the Lord on Sundays, in honor of his resurrection, as we're all doing now.

The Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament) was the Bible Jesus read. And so it was also Jesus' regular practice to read the Hebrew Scriptures in the synagogue and even expound on them.

Nazareth was Jesus' boyhood home, but he'd been away for a while. And now he returns, in the power of the Spirit, for a visit to his home synagogue in the beginning of his ministry.

Let's hear the Word of the Lord from...

Scripture: Luke 4:16-22a (NRSVue)

¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ "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 set free those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰ 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. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Called to Freedom

Jesus stood up to read, was handed the scroll, and he unrolled the scroll. Scrolls could be as long as 24 feet long—so it was too long to hold. Likely Jesus placed it on a table while standing over it. Finding a specific passage in a scroll could take a while, especially with a long book like Isaiah. The congregation patiently waited as he scrolled through Isaiah finding his passage at almost the very end of the long scroll.

There's something fascinating here about Jesus' reading—not just what he included, but what he left out. **He combined selections from Isaiah 61:1-2 and Isaiah 58:6–**. It was a sort of mash up if you will.

Here's where it gets interesting:

Jesus omitted a line from **Isaiah 61:2**—

- This is what he left out: ***"proclaim... the day of vengeance of our God."***
- But Jesus included this: ***"proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."***

Left out **vengeance**. Included **favor**.

This is good news he's talking about—not doom and gloom. What you *don't* say is as important as what you *do* say. But what Jesus *did* say was interesting, too. From **Isaiah 61**, Jesus backtracked three chapters to **Isaiah 58**. He wanted to re-emphasize something he already read.

- *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to set free those who are oppressed."*

It was kind of an exclamation point. So the theme of **"release"** is mentioned twice. And **"vengeance"** is scrapped altogether.

Jesus' Scripture choice also emphasizes the importance of something else in his ministry—

- **the Spirit.**

In fact, Luke especially highlights the Spirit in Jesus' life and ministry. The Spirit came upon Jesus' mother Mary—so that the child born to her would be holy, called Son of God. At Jesus' baptism, the Spirit descended upon him in the bodily form of a dove. In Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness, full of the Spirit, the Spirit led him and empowered him to resist Satan's temptations. Now, we read a few verses earlier that Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee and his hometown of Nazareth. And then Luke wrote, in his second volume of Acts, that we are to wait for the Spirit so that we might be clothed from on high with power from God. Jesus needs the Spirit. So do we.

The Spirit is vital to Jesus and vital to us because the Spirit gives us a strength and divine energy beyond ourselves. The Spirit is God's presence and activity on earth. The Spirit is the very breath of God that empowers ministry and mission.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
The Spirit has anointed me,
The Spirit has sent me to preach the good news to the poor,
to proclaim release for the captives,
sight to the blind,
liberty for the oppressed.
And proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

After reading this, Jesus then rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant, and sat down.

Teachers often read standing up and teach sitting down. All eyes in the synagogue were riveted on Jesus. *What would he say this week?*

"Today," says Jesus, "this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It was a "drop the mic" moment.

Jesus is the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures, God's YES! to his promises.



Today is the day and this is the year of the Lord's favor.

- Forgiveness has come.
- Release and relief are here.
- We're set free.

All were amazed at the gracious words that came from Jesus' mouth.

Immanuel, the grace of Jesus today is as amazing as ever. There is a reason it's called good news—because it is good news! The bad news of outrage, arguments, shaming, and finger-pointing is everywhere these days. Jesus pushes the delete button on it. That's not our way either. The message we share isn't "*annus horribilis*" which in Latin is the "year of misfortune." Instead, we proclaim the year of favor. A spiritual jubilee. Jesus is the universal embrace of God's love for the world. The gospel is more the art of woo than the art of war. The good news is about proclaiming and offering in the Spirit's power healing, rescue, love, welcome, and forgiveness. The gospel, the good news, is a message of grace.

I like how Pope Francis put it, "*the only future worth building includes everyone.*"

We bear tidings of comfort and joy for the whole world, everyone. God is a God of freedom. The defining event in the Old Testament is the Exodus—God freeing Israel from bondage to Egypt. Then God delivers Israel from exile in Babylon, returning them to the promised land. Jesus continues God's mission of setting people free. He has come to set us free from whatever has enslaved us.

- Prisoners from captivity.
- The blind from darkness.
- The poor from destitution and abandonment.
- We're set free from our small selves.
- We're free to love and to serve.

The good news is that Jesus doesn't keep this to himself. The Spirit of Christ resides in us and anoints us. We're set free. And we're empowered to set others free. He continues this work through us. Without Jesus, without the Spirit, we could never do it. We're the body of Christ—continuing his mission.

The presence of the Spirit brings dynamic change:

- The oil of gladness where there's mourning.
- The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
- Living hope, where there's desolation.

Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there's life and hope. If you're feeling burned or bummed out, worn down, down and out, or strung out. Broken down or just flat broke, forgotten, ignored, or in the dark—Jesus is here with the light of God's love.

Come to healing, wholeness, and joyful sobriety and recovery. He offers strength to walk away from what harms you and others. Freedom to really live. To have a new start. To begin again. To laugh. Knowing that we're forgiven, that we're unconditionally loved with God's extravagant love, we're free to choose joy no matter our circumstances.

Christ unshackles us from anything that keeps us from loving God and loving those made in God's image.

The power of the Spirit frees us to do what we were created to do:

- To glorify and enjoy God forever.
- Or as Ignatius put it centuries ago,
- "to praise, reverence, and serve our Lord."

One of the books I was able to read over sabbatical is Gregory Boyle's new book *"The Whole Language: The Power of Extravagant Tenderness."* I love it. In fact, I read it twice, crying and laughing my way through. Father Gregory, known as "G" among the gangsters, is the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles which is the largest gang intervention rehabilitation and reentry program in the world. He shares about a time he went to Pelican Bay State Prison near the Oregon border in California. After celebrating mass in the gym of the A Yard prison, a special concert for the prisoners was arranged. It's called a "Concert of Hope."



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIJaCRInEnY>

Pianist Eric Genius has performed at Carnegie Hall, but his faith also leads him to play in prisons. He and a string ensemble play for forty-five minutes and then engage in a question-and-answer session for fifteen minutes. As Eric began to play, something descended on that prison gym. The anointing of the Spirit was present in a tangible way. As he played, a hushed and reverent stillness that was thick and palpable fell upon the room. The prisoners not only began weeping, but all of them were sobbing. Prison guards were flicking tears from their eyes. Nothing like this had happened at Pelican Bay State Prison before. The sounds of piano, cello, and violin created a release that was warm and utterly surprising. After Eric finished, he asked the stunned audience if they had any questions. For a while, all that could be heard was weeping.

One prisoner, who had tattoos all over his face and would be in prison for life, finally stood. He kept sobbing and finally could speak: all he could get out was one word: "Why?" Eric began crying too. "Because you are deserving. You are worthy of beauty and music. And because there's no difference between you and me."

In a place starving for beauty, Christ's tenderness filled the gym and the prisoners. They were still serving time, but the captives were freed.

Eastern poet Meera puts it this way: *"a love so strong a force it broke the cage."*

And so, we put on the heart of Christ, Immanuel. The Spirit of the Lord is upon us to radiantly reflect Christ's tenderness in the world. The heart of Jesus reminds us that the gospel is truly good news, for all, even the least likely candidates. There's enough God to go around. Or as Father G says,

"Here is the good news: the God we most deeply want IS the God we actually have."

Immanuel—let's attentively gaze upon Christ, fix our eyes upon him. Let's savor his gracious words. Let's put away vengeance. Let's accept his acceptance—of others, of us.

Watch what Jesus says and the Spirit does... and join in the dance. We are little christs, empowered by the Spirit, freed to do the Lord's work of freeing, releasing, relieving, and healing.

That's what it's all about.

Amen.

Sermon Art: A 3rd- to 4th-century Roman mosaic depicts Christ, colored marble, Smithsonian
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/unearthing-world-jesus-180957515/>

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