

What Is the Good News? And Who Is It For?

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Date: 12 January 2025

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's Gospel lesson is a reading from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 4, verses 14 through 30.

A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside.

He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written, The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

[1 : 22] He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, and to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then he 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. All spoke well of him, and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.

Isn't this Joseph's son? they asked. Jesus said to them, Surely you will quote this proverb to me, Physician, heal thyself, and you will tell me, Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.

Truly I tell you, he continued, No prophet is accepted in his hometown. I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years, and there was a severe famine throughout the land.

[2 : 29] Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet.

Yet not one of them was cleansed, only Naaman the Syrian. All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff.

But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way. This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, Lord Christ. Good morning, Christ Church.

I'm Jonathan, one of the pastors here. And, you know, I like to begin a new year just by making a short list of things that I can thank God for.

And so this new year, I wrote down a few things. Thank you, God, for my salvation, you know, for the hope and the comfort and the identity that I've been given in Christ. Thank you, God, for my family, for the love and belonging that I enjoy there.

[3 : 40] Thank you, God, for my work and the meaning and the purpose that this gives to my life. Thank you, God, for my health and the life and the energy and the strength that I have to do all these things.

And this week, I was surprised to add a new item to that list that I never quite thought much about. And I wrote this. Thank you, God, that our church has never attempted to throw me off of a cliff.

And I just want you to know this morning how grateful I am for that. And I do not take it for granted. However, I'm not naive. I know that at least a few people have thought about how satisfying it would be to chuck me over the edge.

And they never actually attempted it. To our great relief, I don't think any of those people go to this church anymore. So that's good for me. But I want us to think about Jesus.

I want to think today about Jesus' hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Here's this assembly, this gathering of believers in Nazareth where Jesus grew up singing and praying.

[4 : 51] And he was listening to the scriptures and the sermons. He was eating fellowship meals with these people for almost three decades every Sabbath day, as was his custom, as was his holy habit, as was his practice.

And there's so much to commend about this congregation in Nazareth. Look at it. It says that they were committed to gathering every week in worship. Presumably, they were committed to giving their tithes and their offerings to fund and to fuel the mission of the synagogue.

As we can see with this attendant who's in charge of the scripture scrolls, they seem to have a robust volunteer culture with every member ministering through their spiritual gifts.

They put the written word of God at the center of their life together. We can see that they stand for the reading of God's word to honor his revelation.

It says that their eyes are fastened on the preacher because this congregation values expository preaching and the application of God's word to their lives. They seem to be equipped to pay attention to gracious words, to notice when they hear words of grace and to respond to those words with wonder and a sense of amazement.

[6 : 10] And it doesn't say this, but I imagine that on occasion, the people in this congregation would say amen to those words of grace. They would say hallelujah when they heard words of grace.

I don't know that. It doesn't say that. But I just think that that might have been the case. But this seems that almost at every point to be a healthy community of believers, except for this whole thing at the end about trying to throw the Son of God off of a cliff.

Right? When you think about it, they had almost everything you could want in a healthy church, a healthy living congregation of faith. But when they hear parts of Jesus' message and his mission, when they hear things that they don't like, when they encounter stuff about his person and his work that doesn't quite jive with them, that they don't want to accept, they try to destroy the Son of God.

And you know, it's good and right, I think, for any church, particularly our church, as we begin this new year, to ask some questions like, well, what actually is the message and the mission of Jesus? And are we aligned with that?

Are we fully on board with that? Or are there parts of it that we love and that we accept and then parts that we dislike and that we oppose? So I want to kind of explore this scripture that we just heard read under three headings.

[7 : 37] I want us to think about the gracious words of Jesus, the infuriating words of Jesus, and then finally the incongruity of God's grace.

So the gracious words of Jesus, the infuriating words of Jesus, and the incongruity of God's grace. So let's start with the gracious words of Jesus. We read in verse 22, it says, all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.

So what was it that amazed them about the preaching of Jesus? It's just that Jesus proclaims good news. Jesus proclaims the gospel of grace. And you can hear it in the reading from the scroll of Isaiah, verse 18, the Spirit of the Lord is on me because he's anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind and to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And it goes on in verse 21, Jesus began by his sermon by saying to them, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. This is Jesus' inaugural address.

[8 : 52] And so he's thought very carefully about how to put his identity and to put his mission in a nutshell. And he's saying, if you want to know who I am, if you want to know what I came to do, then you've got to get inside of this text and let this text get inside of you.

And verse 21 is basically Jesus' top of the page headline. It's his golden thread. It's his one sentence summary of his sermon. And he says, today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

I imagine when he was reading the text, it sounded like this, Jesus is saying, do you want to know what Moses, do you want to know what the prophets were writing about?

They were writing about me. All of God's promises and covenants, all the types and shadows and patterns of the Old Testament, all the institutions of the temple, the sacrifices, the feasts, all the offices of prophets, priests, and kings, all of that.

Today, right now, all the scriptures are being fulfilled in your hearing, especially Isaiah 61. The messianic age, the long foretold day of the Lord, the kingdom of God, the rule and the reign of God, is breaking in upon you today.

[10 : 15] He says, you know all those songs at the end of Isaiah's scroll, in Isaiah 40 to 66, all those songs about the servant of the Lord?

You know that one who sums up and represents the people of God and brings redemption and restoration? You know that anointed one, the Messiah, God's only chosen king, who's going to bring the rule and the reign of God, of the sovereign Lord?

He's going to come and put everything right. He's going to usher in a new age and a new era of justice and peace on the earth. He says, that is me. I'm the long promised servant of the Lord, the long promised deliverer of God's people.

I'm the one, I'm the one of whom the angels announced at that first Christmas Eve, today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.

And Jesus says, I've come to preach good news. I've come to preach and proclaim the gospel of the Lord's favor, of the Lord's grace.

[11 : 30] And Jesus focuses that message of grace on four groups of afflicted or needy people. You notice he talks about the poor, the prisoners, the blind, and the oppressed.

Now, who were these people? Who were the poor that Jesus came to serve? Well, Jesus tells a very famous story, probably all of us know it. It's in Luke chapter 15, about a young man who rejects his father.

He moves very far away from his father, and it doesn't take too long for him to begin to be in want. All of his money is gone. All of his food is gone.

Nobody wants him. He's got nothing. He's just sitting there in pig slop and in misery, and he realizes his need. He realizes his desperation.

He realizes his poverty, and that he's helpless, and he's hopeless without the grace of his father. Jesus says, he's poor, and I have good news for people like that young man who are poor.

- [12 : 35] Jesus tells another story in Luke chapter 18. It's a story about two people who go up to pray at the temple, and the first person he tells about is this Pharisee who goes, and he prays, and he says, God, I thank you that I'm not like all these other terrible sinners around me.

I thank you that I fast twice a week, and that I tithe and give a tenth of all my income to the church and to the poor, and basically in his prayer, he doesn't confess anything to God. He doesn't ask anything from God.

He's just there in the presence of God congratulating himself and exalting himself and saying, God, aren't I great? And then there's this second man that Jesus tells about.

He's a tax collector, and he comes to the temple, and he stands at a distance. He barely comes inside the door, and he doesn't even look up to heaven. He just looks down in a sense of shame and a sense of guilt.

He's poor in spirit, and all he can do is just beat his breast and say, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. He realizes that he is poor as a result of sin, that he's spiritually and morally bankrupt.

- [13 : 48] And so he comes to God empty-handed. He comes knowing that he has nothing to offer to God but his need. And Jesus says, to those who know themselves to be poor, I have very good news for you.

However heavy the debts that you owe to God, however poor you are in his sight, every debt can be canceled. All the ledgers can be cleared.

You no longer owe anything. In fact, I've come to make you rich. I've come to make you spiritually and morally and relationally rich. Jesus says, I've come for the poor, and I've not only come for the poor, but I've also come for prisoners and for the blind and for the oppressed.

And who are those prisoners of war? Who are those exiles? Who are those people who are captive? That Jesus has come to proclaim their freedom. Who are the oppressed?

For whom Jesus has come to set at liberty? You know that word freedom? It's an amazing word. Americans love that word, freedom. But freedom in the Gospel of Luke does not refer so much to political freedom or to social liberation, but it always refers to forgiveness.

- [15 : 04] Forgiveness creates freedom. And Jesus has come for people who know themselves to be spiritually captive to sin. People who know themselves to be imprisoned in their own pride.

People who know themselves to be trapped and stuck in their own self-centeredness and oppressed by this dark power of Satan. And he says that that's you.

I've come with good news. That I've come to set you free. I've come to liberate you. I've come to release you. And who are those blind for whom Jesus has come to enable their recovery of sight?

It's those who know themselves to suffer from spiritual blindness. Those who know that they're in the dark about God. That they need someone to come and heal that inner optic nerve of their soul so that they can see God and know God.

You see, Jesus is making a claim about his person and who he is. He says, I'm that anointed one. I'm the Messiah. And I'm the fulfiller of all Scripture.

- [16 : 15] And he's also making a claim about his work and what he's come to do. He says, really what I've come to do is undo stuff. I've come to undo all the evil effects and consequences of sin.

I've come to undo all of your poverty, all of your imprisonment, all of your blindness, and all of your oppression. And Jesus does not just say, I'm going to do this in some future age.

He says, I've come to do it today. Today, the power of sin and death is being broken. Today, communion with God is being restored.

Today, the kingdom of God is breaking in upon your lives. And this is the good news. It's the good news of the year of the Lord's favor.

The Lord's grace, this new age, this new era that's dawning upon all of you because of me, Jesus says. And everyone, everyone was amazed.

[17 : 14] Everyone was astonished at the words that were coming out of his mouth because they were words of sheer grace. And friends, I ask you, do you know this morning that these words of amazing grace, it's not just for them back then, it's for you today.

Whatever your condition, whatever you bring to God, the Spirit of the Sovereign Lord has anointed Jesus to restore you and to make you whole.

All you need is to bring your need to Him by faith. All you need is need. It's the gracious words of Jesus.

And I think in that congregation in Nazareth, they would say amen. You know, when they hear words of grace, they're amazed at words of grace. It's the gracious words of Jesus.

But then what about these infuriating words of Jesus? Verse 28 says this, All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

[18 : 15] They got up, drove Him out of the town, and they took Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built in order to throw Him off the cliff. What in the world happened? Why were they so amazed?

And now they're full of fury. Why do they want to kill Jesus by throwing Him off a cliff? And then when you throw someone off the cliff, you hurl heavy stones on their head to finish off the job.

Why do they want to do that? Why in three years' time will a crowd in Jerusalem be crying out, Crucify Him, crucify Him. Jesus has not come with bad news.

He's come with good news. Jesus has not come to ruin our lives. He's come to save our lives. Why is Jesus so opposed? Why is Jesus so ignored and neglected today?

Why isn't Jesus more accepted and worshipped if He has such good news? You see, the people of Nazareth, they were attracted to Jesus' message to a degree.

[19 : 12] They were attracted so far. But even then, they were plagued by a lack of faith and unbelief. What do they say? They say, isn't this Joseph's son?

They're nudging each other. They're smiling at one another and they're saying, Wow, Joseph's son can preach. But of course, this is not merely the son of Joseph, is it? This is the son of God.

It's the son of God come to bring the salvation of God. And they have a low view of Jesus. And they have a very weak faith in Jesus.

And Jesus, full of the power of the Holy Spirit, He can see into the minds and hearts of every single person there. And He can see that this community of faith is actually lacking in faith.

They're full of doubt. They're full of unbelief. And how do we know this? Well, look at verse 23. Jesus said to them, and He basically tells them their thoughts. Right? He says, Surely you will quote this proverb to me, Physician, heal yourself.

[20 : 18] And you will tell me, Do here in your own hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum. They're not thinking, Do what you did in Capernaum. They're thinking, Do what we heard you did supposedly.

There's a kind of skepticism here about the alleged factuality of the reports about Jesus. Very much the same today when people read the Gospels as legends and myths, even though the Gospels claim that they are historically reliable eyewitness testimonies of Jesus.

So they have a low view of Jesus. They have a low view of the testimony about Jesus. And apparently they have a very high view of themselves. Because they're ready to taunt Jesus with this proverb, Heal yourself, doctor.

What does that mean? Well, it means, Why don't you prove yourself to us? Why don't you establish your competence before us? Why don't you demonstrate your ability with the healings that you apparently did in Capernaum?

And you know, If you're talking to Jesus like He owes you, And like, You can order Him around, You're just talking to Him the wrong way. And why are these people of Nazareth talking about Capernaum anyway?

[21 : 37] Well, Capernaum was about 20 miles north on the Sea of Galilee. And it would become Jesus' base of operations, Because that's where Peter and Andrew and James and John have their fishing business.

And Capernaum is known to have this heavy, non-Jewish, heavy Gentile population. And the people of Nazareth seem to resent Jesus.

They resent Jesus for having taken the good news of the Lord's favor To people who they deem to be unworthy recipients of grace. And this explains why Jesus' sermon is getting longer and longer.

He says, If you think that there are unworthy people who should not receive God's grace, Then I need to keep preaching, apparently. He says, Verse 24, Truly I tell you, Prophets are not accepted in their own hometowns.

And he says, Let me remind you about two of Israel's greatest prophets who are also not widely accepted, And who inform and inspire my own ministry and mission.

[22 : 43] And he goes on to talk about the prophet Elijah, Particularly a situation in 1 Kings chapter 17. And then he talks about the prophet Elisha, And a particular story in 2 Kings chapter 5.

Now, why is this so edgy? And what is so provocative about Elijah and Elisha? Well, here's what Jesus says in verse 25.

I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, When the sky was shut for three and a half years, And there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, But to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon.

And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, Yet not one of them was cleansed, only Naaman the Syrian. You see, the people of Nazareth, They'd been waiting for God to liberate Israel, Right?

To set the oppressed free. They'd been waiting for God to come and release them from their pagan, And polytheistic, and idol-worshipping enemies.

[24 : 00] They were waiting for God to come and pour out His wrath and His condemnation On the wicked Gentile nations that were occupying Israel. And what they wanted was grace for Israel and fierce judgment for everyone else.

And Jesus comes into that situation and He points out that when these great prophets, Elijah and Elisha, Were active in these very same parts of northern Israel, Nazareth, Capernaum, It wasn't Israel who received God's grace and restoration, But it was pagans, only pagans.

Elijah helped this needy widow, Elisha helped a needy leper, But neither one of them was in Israel among the people of God. Israel's God seems to be rescuing all the wrong people, Just like Jesus is doing in Capernaum.

And this is why they're furious. This is why they want to throw Him off the cliff. You see, we talked about the gracious words of Jesus And the infuriating words of Jesus.

But I want to close by thinking together about And zeroing in on the incongruity of God's grace. There's an incongruity in God's grace.

[25 : 18] And in verse 22, it says that they were amazed at the gracious words, At the words of grace that came from Jesus' lips. What seems to have astonished them is that the grace of God Is not limited to one group of people who seem worthy and deserving.

But what seems to astonish them is that Jesus is saying The grace of God is for everybody. If you'll receive it by faith, it's for everybody. And see, the people of Nazareth, this congregation in Nazareth, They had a narrow and overly restricted and constrained vision and imagination For how deep and how wide the grace of God was prepared to go.

And this is why Jesus shows them God's grace and God's salvation at work In 1 and 2 Kings, which I know all of us have been reading as we started a new year. You've been soaking in 1 and 2 Kings, right?

Because we may not be aware of that story, let me just unpack it a bit more. Israel was full of people who were afflicted and needy at this time.

Widows who had been broken by death and needed feeding. Lepers who had been broken by disease and needed healing. But to whom did God send His prophets?

[26 : 41] To whom did God send His grace? He sent them with good news to the spiritually poor and the morally bankrupt outsiders.

Right? When Elijah was a prophet in these very same parts, God sent him past all the needy widows in Israel to a pagan woman inside of all places.

She can't feed her starving family. She can't raise her dead son and give him back his life. But that's exactly what God does for her. By His grace and through His prophet. Here is one unworthy outsider, if there ever was one.

In a patriarchal culture, here's a woman. In a Jewish culture, here's a non-Jew. Here's a widow. Here's a person of extremely low status and absolutely no wealth.

And that's who God goes after. And then Jesus seems to up the ante here because He says, When Elisha was the prophet in these parts, God sent him past all those unclean lepers in Israel.

[27 : 46] And He sent him not to a poor man, but to a rich man. He sent him to a man who had more money than he knew what to do with this guy named Naaman, who was the general of the Syrian army.

He's the leader of Israel's mortal enemy. He's a murderer. He puts people in slavery. He's an idol worshiper. He has all the wrong doctrines and all the wrong ethics.

And just like this widow, he cannot help himself. He cannot cure himself. And so that's exactly what the God of grace does.

He does for him what he cannot do for himself. And you see, Jesus is pointing out to this congregation in Nazareth. He says, These are the people that you would least expect to receive the grace of God.

These are the most unlikely candidates for salvation. And Jesus is giving them a paradigm that this is how grace and this is how salvation works.

[28 : 50] The only people that I've come for are those who know that they're desperate. Those who know that they have nothing of value before God. Those who know that they're unworthy and they're spiritually poor and they're morally bankrupt.

Those who know that they're helpless and they're hopeless unless God intervenes. And so Jesus puts this question to the congregation of Nazareth. And I think he puts this question to us at Christ Church.

He says, Beloved, do you know that you too are poor and unworthy? Do you know the only qualification to receive God's grace is to acknowledge that you have no claim?

You have no claim to status, no claim to favor with God. It's to recognize that the incongruity between how poor and unworthy you are and how rich and lavish God is in His grace.

It's to see that this grace is so unconditioned and incongruous of a gift that it just does not match the worth of its recipients. And it is not limited by our sinfulness and our hostility to God.

[30 : 04] God's grace is so great that it's given freely. It's given without prior conditions. It's given without regard to our worth and our capacity and our background and our experiences.

You see, Jesus is inviting every single one of us to look into that mirror and to see staring back at us an unworthy recipient of grace. And not only that, but Jesus is also challenging us to look around us.

Not just to look in the mirror and see ourselves, but to look around us in our neighborhoods and our networks. To look outside of the walls of our synagogue, as it were. To look beyond the bounds of our church and to ask ourselves, Who are the people I would least expect to receive the grace of God?

Who are the people who are the most unlikely candidates of salvation? And we are invited to imagine that maybe that's who God wants to reach through us.

Through you this year. Through me this year. You know, since this past fall, we've been praying. As a church, we've been praying for three people that we would like to see begin to explore the faith.

[31 : 20] Maybe for the first time. We've been praying on a daily basis for God's kingdom to break through in their lives. And so I just want to encourage you to picture those people right now.

Maybe you don't have three people. You can think of three people. Maybe you haven't been praying for them. That's okay. You can start praying for them right now. But just, I want to encourage you to picture their faces and to just ask yourself, What might this God of all grace be doing in their lives?

And how does God want me to be moving toward them, Just as Elijah moved toward that Sidonian woman and Elisha moved toward that Syrian man and Jesus moved toward those people in Capernaum?

How does God want me to make time for them on my calendar and make space for them at my table? And how might God be wanting to open up some simple conversations that could turn into serious conversations, that could turn into spiritual conversations with these unlikely recipients of grace?

See, the reality is that Jesus' mission has become our mission. Right?

[32 : 36] He has called poor and unworthy sinners like me and like you by His grace to participate in His work among the poor and the imprisoned and the blind and the oppressed so that we could say the Spirit of the Lord has been poured out on us and He has anointed us to proclaim the good news to the poor and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the Lord's grace.

You see, I'm praying and I know there's a group of praying and I would invite you to pray in 2025 that God would reach and rescue all the wrong people. That if Jesus' mission is to seek and to save the lost, that He would seek and save people that we least expect to receive the grace of God, the people who are the most unlikely candidates for His salvation.

I'm praying that in 2025, atheists and agnostics, Buddhists and Muslims, New Age spiritualists and none of the above secularists, I'm praying especially for nominal Christians and self-righteous Christians to come and experience the Lord's favor and the Lord's grace for the first time through their relationships with us.

Friends, are you excited about that? Do you imagine that God would want to answer those prayers? Do you believe that God's word is powerful enough to affect a transformation?

Can you imagine women like this Sidonian woman and men like this Syrian man coming to know the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ? You know what was so amazing about this Sidonian and Syrian?

[34 : 25] It's that when the prophet came to them, they believed God's word. They were unlike these people of Nazareth. They believed the prophet when God sent the prophet.

And because they believed in God's word, they were transformed by God's grace and they began to confess their faith. The Sidonian widow in 1 Kings 17, she says, Now I know that the word of the Lord is the truth.

The Syrian leper says in 2 Kings 5, he says, Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. And because of that, now I know that God affected by His grace, they began a journey with the living God of grace.

Do we believe that God can bring about such transformations of life, such confessions of faith in our day and among our people? Do you believe that God can cause your friends and your family and your neighbors and your coworkers to say, Now I know that the word of the Lord is the truth.

Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel and except in Jesus Christ. Friends, let's trust in the God of all grace to come and do amazing things among us.

[35 : 50] Amazing works of grace in 2025. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.