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Date: 24 January 2016

[0:00] In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. So our gospel passage for this morning takes place kind of chronologically, right after Jesus is tempted in the desert by the devil and he withstands the temptation.

! Then after that ordeal, he goes back to his hometown to preach, which was really quite an ordeal in and of itself. I can honestly say from experience that going back home to do ministry can be pretty unnerving, really.

Remembering the first time that I celebrated Holy Communion, the day after my ordination of the priesthood, I celebrated at what was my home congregation, the congregation that had sent me to seminary, the congregation that I had been attending when I was a freshman in college and was in every way still just a kid.

It was a totally weird experience. Now, it must have been even weirder for the people of Nazareth who were there when Jesus came home to preach, who knew Jesus, who knew his family.

It must have been weird for them to hear what Jesus had to say when he came home to read and to preach in the synagogue. Now, in my situation, I, of course, when I went home to minister, didn't claim to be the Messiah, but Jesus did.

[1:28] And, of course, if you read on in the text, it almost got him thrown over a cliff, which, if anyone has ever wanted to throw me over a cliff, they haven't said so.

I don't know if anyone's scheming out there. But, yeah, let that sink in for a second. They conspired to throw him over a cliff. Yeah. So, what is it that Jesus read in the synagogue?

And what did he say about it? Well, let's look at Luke chapter 4, starting in verse 17. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He enrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant, sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Now, so far what we see in this passage, there's not really anything that would have seemed out of the ordinary in synagogue worship for that time. There are really only two differences that would stand out to us today.

[2:50] The first is that in the synagogue, and this might be confusing if we're wondering why Jesus sat down, in the synagogue, the preacher would sit down to preach rather than stand, and Jesus is doing that.

Now, the other thing that would be unusual for us is that apparently all of the eyes in the congregation were fixed on the preacher. That's unusual because usually some eyes are fixed on wristwatches when sermons are having.

But what Jesus says next is truly extraordinary. He began to say to them, Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Now, that turns the whole thing upside down once he makes this claim.

We can assume that those in the synagogue knew their scriptures. They knew that Jesus had read and was about to preach about the coming of the Messiah.

They probably expected that. About the one who would come and save God's people and set them free. That's what they were expecting to hear a sermon about. Now, what they didn't expect was hearing Jesus say, Oh, and by the way, that's me, just in case you were wondering.

[4:00] Now, from our perspective, we can look at the Isaiah passage and see a clear description of who Jesus is and what he was going to do in that passage, right?

The Spirit of the Lord is on Jesus. And isn't that exactly what we remembered and celebrated when we remembered the baptism of Jesus, when the Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove?

But why, for what purpose is the Spirit of the Lord upon him? Well, he has been anointed to preach good news to the poor.

Now, we see that very theme taken up elsewhere in the Gospels, don't we? Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus here is making something incredibly clear about his mission.

He is going to those who are poor in spirit, to those who know their frailty, who know their weakness, to those who are sinners, to those whom others would disregard or cast aside.

[5 : 04] Jesus is going to proclaim the good news to them because they're the ones who aren't ashamed to admit that they need help and that they need a Savior.

Now, what else? Jesus is saying that he's been sent to proclaim liberty to the captives, to find those who aren't free and to give them freedom, to give them even the freedom to become the children of God through faith in him, freedom from guilt, freedom from condemnation, freedom from carrying that heavy burden of sin, freedom found in Jesus alone, freedom found only in the power of his precious blood.

And sight to those who are blind, of course, both those who are literally blind, whom Jesus seeks out and heals miraculously, but also those who suffer from spiritual blindness, right?

And that's something that I think we tend to give too little attention. You know, because of the fall, because of the sin of our first father, Adam, we're all blind by nature.

Blind to the truth of God, blind to the depths of our sin. Our faith in Christ is a miraculous healing, right? It is the result of God's grace in Christ taking off our blinders and healing our blindness so that we see the truth, so that we may believe, so that we may place our hope in Christ crucified and be saved.

[6 : 39] And Jesus tells us that he's fulfilling all of this. To set at liberty those who are oppressed. Well, oppressed by what? What oppresses us?

Well, isn't it the burden of the world, the flesh, and the devil? Those forces at work against us, even within us, that strive to keep us in bondage.

All of those things, those forces, those powers, visible and invisible, physical and spiritual, that seek to keep us from the freedom of the love and grace of God.

Jesus, saying that he has come to set us free from all of that. And to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. An eternal year of the Lord's favor.

A never-ending year of the Lord's favor to all who hear and believe God's Messiah, God's Savior.

And that, Jesus is telling us, is himself.

[7 : 46] So Jesus, as we see, when we think about all that it implies when he says this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing, we see he's making some pretty enormous claims about himself, isn't he?

Well, and how do the people react? Well, at first, the response is actually pretty positive. It says, all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth.

Well, all good so far, right? But then, they said, is not this Joseph's son? Now, here they stop and they say, wait a minute, we know this guy.

We know his parents. We know his family. And Jesus, sensing that, actually gives them something of a hard response.

he said, and he said, truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his hometown. But in truth, I tell you, there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heavens were shut up three days and six months and a great famine came over all the land.

[8 : 57] And Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Jeraphat in the land of Sidon to a woman who was a widow. Now, Jesus here, to think about this in context, is pointing out that Elijah, in this instance, was sent only to a Gentile woman.

Right? He goes on, there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elijah, and none of them was cleansed but only named the Syrian. Again, what's Jesus doing?

He's pointing out another Gentile who received God's mercy through the ministry of one of God's prophets. Now, at this point, Jesus' hearers are pretty much ready to throw down.

Look at what happens next. When they heard these things, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath, and they rose up and drove him out of the town and brought him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built so that they could throw him down the cliff.

So what do we really see going on in this whole exchange? Seems kind of weird, kind of unusual.

[10:10] Well, here's what happens. Jesus at first is received as a wise and respected teacher. He sits down, all eyes are fixed on him, they want to hear what he has to say.

They even begin to speak positively of Jesus, right? But Jesus claims to be more than a wise teacher here, doesn't he? He claims to be the Messiah.

He claims to be the Lord, and their hearts start to harden when he makes that proclamation. When Jesus brings their hard-heartedness to light and suggests that his ministry will be better received by the Gentiles, their hard-heartedness turns to absolute anger.

Now, have you ever been so angry with someone you wanted to throw them over a cliff? You don't have to answer that, by the way. That's pretty angry.

But what it really comes down to, brothers and sisters, is that his hearers heard his clear claim to be Lord, and ultimately they rejected that.

[11:21] Jesus, as a wise human teacher, as a good rabbi, was something they were willing to accept. But the truth that Jesus is Lord made them so mad they wanted to throw him over a cliff.

But brothers and sisters, doesn't that claim that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus alone is the way, the truth, and the life, isn't that claim often rejected just as fervently today as it was then?

Like the hearers in the synagogue, plenty of people are willing to think of Jesus as a pretty nice guy, a good human teacher, a fairly sound philosopher, but the claim that Jesus is Lord means far more than that, doesn't it?

Now, C.S. Lewis talks about this in his classic work *Mere Christianity*. Lewis writes, I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him.

I am ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher.

[12:47] He would either be a lunatic on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg, or else he would be the devil of hell. You must make your choice.

Either this man was and is the son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon, or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God.

But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Brothers and sisters, that Sabbath day in the synagogue, he did not leave that option open to them. And he still doesn't. Jesus says that he is Lord, that he is the Savior, that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no man comes to the Father, but by him.

Do we believe that? Now, I think sometimes that the church is tempted to try to make the message of the gospel more palatable, more humanly acceptable, more full of worldly wisdom in our attempts to reach out to the world around us.

[14:12] Now, this week, I shared on my Facebook wall a meme that quoted the reformer and theologian Martin Luther, who once said, the gospel cannot be truly preached without offense and tumult.

So, why is it offensive? It's good news. Why is it offensive? Well, because to get to the good news, we have to realize just how bad things actually are.

That we have sinned against a holy God, that we are without any hope in this world, that we are hopelessly broken and we can't fix ourselves. Then we hear the good news.

the gospel of Jesus Christ. That Jesus has been anointed to preach good news to the poor, that Jesus can restore sight to the blind, that Jesus sets the captives free, that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, that no matter who we are or what we have done, we can find forgiveness in the cross of Jesus Christ.

That no matter what mistakes we've made, we can be justified by the precious blood of Jesus, that eternal life, victory over the grave, can be found in Jesus Christ and him alone, not because of our works or because of what we have done, but because of God's grace in Christ.

[15:45] Find that God loves us so much that he even gave up his only son for us. That is the good news. Is that what we proclaim?

So, brothers and sisters, let's be clear. Jesus is Lord. He said so boldly. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and he said so boldly.

Jesus is the anointed Savior, and he said so boldly. he didn't leave any doubt and didn't intend to leave any doubt about his claim to be Lord, his claim to be more than a wise teacher, his claim to be the only way to the Father.

Now, I have to say, my brothers and sisters, that is a message that humbles the proud, and even angers the hard-hearted. But you know what?

It is a message that lifts up the broken, the hurting, the lost, the poor, the blind, and the captive. And it's the only message that can really fully do that.

[17:07] Now, one thing we have been talking about a lot in this new year, in the life of our church, as an intentional focus on outreach and evangelism, how we're going to do that.

Now, in light of those conversations, I want us to keep all of this in mind. You know, as we talk and pray together about evangelism in the coming years, we talk and pray about what God would have us do, can we commit together to keeping the gospel central?

can we agree that the gospel must be at the very center of our life together and at the very center of our outreach?

Can we agree to keep one another focused on Christ and him crucified when we might be tempted to be distracted by other things? My brothers and my sisters, in the weeks and the years to come, may we ever more faithfully be a community that proclaims with boldness and with love that Jesus Christ is Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.