

“The Anointed One”

Of course I have no idea whatsoever what impelled me to choose *In the Bleak Midwinter* as the middle hymn this morning. But I suppose the “snow on snow” part seemed right; or was it the “snow on rain on ice on ice on snow on snow on snow” part? In any event I’ve always loved this hymn; and ending up with giving our hearts to Jesus seems just where Christmas ought to come out. Giving our heart and soul and strength and mind to God as Jesus reveals God to us is why we’re here; and it’s probably been only about ten minutes since we’ve said so.

Christmas Eve was exactly one month ago. But in our churchly imagination by now Jesus is all grown up. We’ve had a succession of “debut” stories, beginning last week with John’s account of Jesus changing water into wine at a wedding.¹ Today we hear from Luke, our main storyteller for the year, as he bends over backwards to make the story of Jesus’ return to his hometown into the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

It takes some doing. Mark and Matthew also tell the story of Jesus’ return to Nazareth, but they don’t make as much of it as Luke does. Mark and Matthew place this tale well into their gospels, long after we’ve seen Jesus heal and heard him teach, when we already know his voice and have seen how he moves. But in Luke this story is front and center and it serves notice regarding both who Jesus is and how he will be received. It’s so substantive that the lectionary gives it to us over two weekends; so we’ll approach today as though we don’t really know how the story will turn out. No fair reading ahead: I absolutely forbid you to read this at home on your own! And don’t even *think* of reading the whole Gospel of Luke—that would be scandalous!

Luke’s account of Jesus’ homecoming begins with an awkward but important summary before we leap into Nazareth: “Then Jesus [who has just been tempted by the devil], filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everybody.”

¹ John 2:1-11.

Local boy makes good. He's a hit. He's famous. Everybody is talking about him. The folks back home are proud, but perhaps surprised and just a little bit confused. Jesus? The carpenter's kid from down the block? The one who tipped over our outhouse? He's coming back home to deliver the graduation address at the high school. That ought to be interesting. The homies are prepared to be amazed; and so are we.

Luke is big on context. When he tells a story he wants us to know how it fits into everything around it. He tells us who the emperor is, and who the governor is, and what the local customs are. So here he begins by establishing for Jesus a context of faithfulness. "When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom." Remember that Luke told us how Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day of his life, and he was dedicated at the Temple in Jerusalem.² Luke tells us the story of Jesus' bar mitzvah when he acts out by staying behind in the Temple to kibitz with the rabbis. Then Jesus goes home to Nazareth and is obedient to his parents like a good Jewish boy. He is no stranger to the synagogue. Where do you go on Shabbat? You go to services.

We're not entirely sure what they did in the synagogue; in fact, this passage is the best description we have of what happened in first century Jewish worship apart from the temple. It seems to have been pretty simple: prayers spoken and sung, perhaps; scriptures read and taught; an offering for the needy. The whole town would be in the synagogue, probably with men and women in different areas. But Jesus doesn't go there to impress anybody, like a politician who doesn't quite know how to behave in church; he goes out of faithfulness, as someone who belongs.

Anybody could read scripture. A visitor or guest may have been particularly welcomed to read. The worshipping community would have been especially eager to hear from Jesus, because they had been hearing so much about him.

It isn't clear who picks the lesson. Was there a fixed progression of readings through the year? Did someone else choose the scroll of Isaiah and Jesus chose the particular passage? Or was this the one text out of all the law and the prophets that Jesus chose to read in order to present himself? We don't know. But we do know that the reading places Jesus' presence and activity squarely within the context—there's that word again—of prophecy.

² Luke 2:21-40. These events in Luke get exactly as many verses as the more familiar Christmas story with the Roman census, the stable, the shepherds and the angels.

It's from Isaiah 61, a portion of the book of Isaiah that modern scholars call Third Isaiah. It contains a particular message of hope to exiles—Israelites who had been carried off to Babylon and forced to work as slaves for their captors. They were separated from their land; their temple and capitol lay in ruins; they struggled to find a voice in which to “sing the LORD’S song in a foreign land.”³ Isaiah offered images of hope for the return and restoration of God’s people. This language was particularly powerful to people in Jesus’ day because Israel was living under a brutal Roman military occupation. It was as though they were exiles in their own country.

So imagine the power of these words on Jesus’ lips: “The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because God has anointed me...” The Hebrew word for “anointed one” is “Messiah.” In Greek the same word is “Christ.” Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah, the one chosen by God to bring a particular message of hope and liberation.

That message, as we find it in Isaiah, hearkens back to an amazing tradition from Leviticus 25, declaring a “Year of Jubilee.” This was to happen every fifty years: a “sabbath of years” was seven years; a “sabbath of sabbaths of years” was forty-nine years; and the fiftieth year was a year of jubilee—for most people, a once in a lifetime event. In the jubilee year liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land to all its inhabitants. All debts would be forgiven. All land would revert to its ancestral ownership in the original tribal allotments. It was like pressing an economic “reset” button that would return all things to their original state. No crops would be grown in the jubilee year: people would live off the harvest from the prior year. The year of jubilee would be holy to the LORD and a reminder that all things belong to God.

There is no evidence that the jubilee year was ever practiced—at least not in all its provisions. But it remains a powerful and radical image of restoration. And that is the image that Isaiah employs and Jesus adopts to portray the radically new yet profoundly traditional thing God is doing.

“[God]... has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. [God] has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,⁴ to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favor [that is, the year of jubilee].” This is a remarkable and incendiary passage.

³ Psalm 134:2.

⁴ Some of the Israelites were blinded before they were led off into captivity.

Evidently in the synagogue a leader would stand up to read and then sit down to teach. So as Jesus sat down, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” We can imagine the sense of breathless expectation. Jesus tells them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Wow: Jesus is the anointed one who comes to proclaim the world turned upside down.

This is not the first inkling we have had of such a message. In the *magnificat*, Mary’s song of praise to God for having been chosen to be the mother of Jesus, she rejoices that God, “... has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts... brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly... filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.”⁵ And Simeon, the old man who waited in the temple for a glimpse of God’s anointed one, proclaimed upon seeing Jesus, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed...”⁶ So we have already been warned that Jesus’ message will be one of political upheaval. And we have been warned that it will engender opposition.

When Jesus says that Isaiah’s message has been fulfilled in their hearing, he is making it plain to the folks in Nazareth that he is not attempting a new teaching *ex nihilo*—out of nothing. Rather, he is recalling God’s people to their established traditions. He is teaching the people about the faith they already espouse, more or less. He has come not to invent something new, but to fulfill promises that are old: to fulfill a message of hope, to be filled by that message, to embody it, to bring it to life. As he proceeds to preach and to teach and to heal and to confront, Jesus will *become* the words of Isaiah. He will become God’s message of hope and healing, of abundance, of release to captives and to those who are crushed—in this context, particularly those who are crushed beneath a burden of debt. He will announce a reign of God that will call for justice for the poor. In Luke Jesus doesn’t teach, as in Matthew, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” He teaches, “Blessed are the poor,” for they will be the recipients of God’s graciousness—“theirs is the kingdom of God.”⁷

This sort of message is disruptive in any age. It is a message of judgment upon the way things are, and a message of possibility for the

⁵ See Luke 1:46-55.

⁶ Luke 2:34-35.

⁷ Contrast Matthew 5:1-12, from the Sermon on the Mount, with Luke’s Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:17-26. Luke adds a series of “woes” to those who are rich, full and laughing.

reordering of society. Next week we will deal with the response to Jesus' message both in Nazareth and in our own time.

For today it is enough to observe that for followers of Jesus the Christ, Jesus the anointed one, Isaiah's message is to be our message, as well. It is not enough to observe that some people happen to be rich and others happen to be poor as though there were no connection between the two. Some people, in the words of Bill Coffin, are born on third base and think they hit a home run; while others never even get a turn at bat. To love Jesus is to love what he loved, to care about what he cared about, to seek to embody with our lives the message he embodied.⁸ To do less is to work in reverse the miracle recounted in John, and to change the strong, heady wine of the Gospel back into the featureless water of embracing things as they are.⁹

The good news in this passage is that we don't have to accept the world as it is. God is doing a new thing, and it begins today: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Today we accept the challenge of living more gently upon the earth, more justly in the world, more generously in our dealings with others, more hopefully in our politics. We do this not because it's easy, but because we are followers of Jesus the Christ, the anointed one.

Amen

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⁸ This language is indebted to Marcus Borg's *The Heart of Christianity*.

⁹ The image of contemporary Christianity changing wine into water also comes from Bill Coffin. I recall it from an interview he did with David Suskind when Coffin left Yale in about 1976.