

“Bringing Good News”

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Scripture: I Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-30

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This week I couldn't help but hear Jesus' words in light of the devastation engulfing Haiti. What does good news to the poor mean in their situation right now? As I've looked at various commentaries on this passage I've found it interesting how quickly they tend to lean toward spiritualizing Jesus' words rather than interpreting them materially. Does Jesus really announce a release from spiritual poverty only? In the face of 200,000 dead and millions homeless and hungry, can a spiritual message even be heard before physical needs are met?

But let's come back to that. This story is Luke's version of how Jesus began his ministry. Even though he's already gained some fame in Galilee, it's not until he returns home that he announces, through the words of Isaiah, his true mission. As you may imagine there's some debate over what exactly he is announcing here. The passage from Isaiah is fairly clear in its own context, but when Jesus takes it up and seems to apply it to himself, it suddenly takes on new shades of meaning.

In its own context this passage from Isaiah refers to deliverance from exile. It's the announcement of the re-building of Israel. It offers a vision of what God desires for Israel and how God will bring that vision to fruition through a servant. Now, we don't know exactly who that servant is. It may be the prophet himself; it may be a king or some other leader in the community; it may be some future messianic figure. There's no need to be discouraged that we can't identify this person, though, because in the time of Jesus' ministry no one knew for sure who it was talking about either.

But regardless of who the “anointed one” might be, the vision itself is of a radical reordering of life for a community in trouble. Release of prisoners, healing of irreversible conditions, an end to oppressive circumstances, this is a vision that shakes the very foundations of society. It's the same great reversal referred to earlier in Luke's Gospel through Mary who sings, “[God] has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; [God] has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” Finally, the “year of the Lord's favor” refers to what the scriptures call “Jubilee.”

Jubilee is a sort of a technical term. It means literally “horn,” like a ram's horn or possibly “shout,” as in “shout for joy.” The year of jubilee is described in Leviticus as the year following seven Sabbath years. A Sabbath occurred every seventh, and it was when Israelites were told to let their land lie fallow as a reminder that they are not the owners of the land, but that the land belongs to God. After seven of those cycles occur, after forty-nine years, a Jubilee year is declared. According to Leviticus: “You shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you.” During that year all debts are wiped out. Anyone who has put their land up as collateral, or has sold their land to pay off a debt, will get it back. So all the transactions that have resulted in the accumulation of wealth for some and the impoverishment of others would be rendered void.

Now, scholars disagree as to whether jubilee was ever practiced in Israel. That could be Western cultural conditioning; we just can't imagine a society doing that sort of thing. But it's clear in scripture that this is God's intention. So a prophetic appeal to jubilee as God's desire to relieve the suffering of the poor is not easily dismissed. And when that proclamation comes from Jesus' own mouth, it seems to me we Christians are bound to take it seriously.

Jubilee is not a spiritual practice. It has a spiritual effect, but it is fundamentally material; it has to do with the re-distribution of wealth and possessions. Our government, for instance, declared a sort of jubilee

for the financial industry in our country last year. That relief has not been extended to those in danger of foreclosure. So what was good news for large banks has become the same news, even bad news, for individuals with debts. It reminds me of the story Jesus tells in Matthew's Gospel about a slave who owes his master a great deal of money and is forgiven, only to turn around and demand payment from another slave who owes him a pittance by comparison. So in practice jubilee can pose some problems. It may require some discernment, some judgment.

Now, the people gathered in the synagogue marveled when Jesus brought good news. They didn't become upset by it, as some commentators suggest. They only became angry when Jesus told them that it wasn't meant for them alone, but for everyone whom God loves. It's meant for people who make bad financial decisions as well as for institutions that make bad loans. It's meant for nations for whom one disaster can send them spiraling into chaos as well as for nations that plan ahead and are prepared when disaster strikes. That can be a bitter pill for some to swallow. Our ideas of justice require consequences; someone has to pay the price. But God says, "No. You have suffered enough. It's time to make things right."

The people of Nazareth, because of their offense at such lavish generosity, take it upon themselves to kill the messenger rather than open themselves up to a God who would embrace their Gentile neighbors. And there are certainly those in our society who would much rather see banking institutions given relief than to see it given to people who take on bad debts. But if the good news Jesus brings applies to anyone, it must apply to everyone. People are certainly free to reject it, but I don't think we're allowed to withhold it. Jesus is announcing a complete change in how everything works. He's announcing release for those who have been driven into poverty and despair by a system that is broken. And he's announcing release for those who have benefited from that system and are now in the position of wielding power over their sisters and brothers. We are all in need of this good news.

So what's the good news for Haiti? Before the earthquake, it was no secret that Haiti is the poorest country in our hemisphere. Anyone could have seen, and surely knew, that a disaster like this would knock this country off its axis for at least a generation. And while the images of destruction are fresh, the help and the commitment for Haiti are strong. But what happens when the cameras leave? I heard a commentator on the radio yesterday express surprise that already Haiti is no longer on the front pages of the major newspapers. It seems to me that good news for Haiti might be our commitment and resolve not to forget them, not to allow them to slip back into obscurity and be crowded out by our own problems.

Perhaps the good news we could bring as a congregation is to partner with an agency or a congregation in Haiti and learn how we can make a material difference in their condition, now and in the future. We can begin to see the Body of Christ extending beyond these walls to enfold God's people in Haiti and recognize that their suffering truly is our own. It's that kind of solidarity that forms the core of Jesus' announcement in Nazareth. Jesus isn't announcing a programme or a social blueprint; there's no formula here to follow. He's offering a relationship, demonstrating God's commitment to stand with us. And as his body we're called to do the same. We're called to stand with the poor, the blind, the imprisoned, the forgotten, and the lost. We're called to lift them up, to cleanse their wounds, and to work beside them in rebuilding their lives.

That's the good news Jesus brings. News announced in the midst of devastation and fear bringing hope and the promise of life.

Amen