

SERMON NOTES

Sixth Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Synaxis Gospel

Luke 4:14-23

A TIME FOR FORGIVENESS AND RESTORATION

INTRODUCTION

Of the four Gospels, three of them (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are called the *synoptics* because they tell the story of the life of Christ in a similar way. Often large portions are identical in choice of events and even in wording. However, the synoptic writers are like florists, who, having the same flowers available to them, will choose some and arrange their choices differently for their bouquet's purpose. All the events of Christ's life are not recorded in any of the Gospels and those events chosen are not always placed in the same order. Each writer has his own special message to convey. His choice and arrangement of events communicate that message.

Luke's Gospel is beloved for its account of the birth of Jesus, giving us details that Matthew has left out (Mark chose to leave out the birth account entirely). However, Luke has chosen to begin the *actual ministry* of our Lord, after His preparatory baptism and the forty days in the desert experience, with a visit to His hometown, Nazareth. This visit is also briefly mentioned by Matthew¹ and Mark², but much later in their accounts of the ministry of Jesus and without the dramatic details of our reading for today.

Luke has placed this account of Jesus' visit to Nazareth first because it encapsulates the history of His ministry (and the reaction to it) from its beginning and *raison d'être* right down to the Crucifixion.³ It mirrors the history of God's gracious plans for His ancient people, the Jews, and their rebellious and murderous reactions to His messengers.

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 4:14-23

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit; and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district. And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all.

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up; and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath, and stood up to read.

¹Matthew 13:54-58

²Mark 6:1-6

³Noticed by William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke* New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker: House, 1978) p. 250, and later by Joseph A. Fitzmyer *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) p. 529.

And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written,

"THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL 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 DOWNTRODDEN,

TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."

And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him.

And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips; and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your home town as well.' "

NOTES

And Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit;

The birth account of John the Baptist, followed by the account of our Lord's birth, and His early years, has taken up Luke's first two chapters. The third chapter deals with John the Baptist's ministry at the Jordan River and the baptism of Jesus. The fourth chapter begins with the account of the forty days in the desert and the temptation efforts by the devil. In this first verse of our reading, Luke jumps from the temptation event to Jesus' return from Judah to Galilee, a region north of Jerusalem dominated by the Sea of Galilee.

Galilee is mentioned by the ancient prophets with reference to the day of the Messiah: ". . . by the way of the sea, on the other side of the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them."⁴

"Full of the Holy Spirit," Jesus faced His tempter in the desert;⁵ and now He returns home "in the power of the Holy Spirit." What was veiled when He left Galilee to be baptized would now be fully displayed.

⁴ Isaiah 9:1-2

⁵ Luke 4:1

and news about Him spread through all the surrounding district.

The other synoptic writers tell of miraculous healings and the casting out of demons performed by Jesus in the beginning of His ministry, but Luke chooses to only hint at all that with the words, “He returned in the power of the Holy Spirit” and with this statement about the initial reaction of the people to these wonders.

And He began teaching in their synagogues and was praised by all.

Of course, Jesus both taught and healed, but it is the teaching that Luke emphasizes here and the positive response to it before Jesus reached his hometown. Jesus’ teaching will be the focus in this account.

And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up;

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, a tiny village near Jerusalem, but the family was forced to flee to Egypt to escape the death edict of King Herod. His mother, Mary, was a native of Nazareth in Galilee. Joseph may have been from somewhere in Judea, for it seems he intended to return there from Egypt. Being warned by God in a dream, Joseph changed his mind and they settled in Nazareth. That Jesus was brought up in this region fulfilled the prophecy about Galilee.

and as was His custom, He entered the synagogue on the Sabbath,

The Temple in Jerusalem was the only proper place for the nation to worship by offering sacrifices. The synagogue system probably had been initiated during the Jewish Exile in Babylon. Far from their Temple and sacrifices, they needed at least a place to pray together. After the Exile, the synagogues became the religious centers in the local villages and neighborhoods for prayer, study, and teaching purposes, and for training the children. Non-sacrificial worship services were held there on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was actually the seventh day of the week, our Saturday. Our Sunday is the first day. The Sabbath had been the day of worship for Jesus and His followers as good Jews, but tradition tells us that Sunday was chosen instead of Saturday by Christians in honor of the Resurrection.

Only Luke notes that it was the custom of Jesus to attend synagogue on the Sabbath.

and stood up to read.

As a matter of respect for the Holy Scriptures, one stood to read them.

And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book, and found the place where it was written,

The order of worship in the Synagogue included the singing of a psalm, the recitation of the Shema (HEAR O ISRAEL, THE LORD YOUR GOD IS ONE LORD!), a recitation of ‘the eighteen blessings’, reading of an appointed section of the Torah (the five books of Moses – the first five books of the Old Testament), and a reading of a section of the prophets. This was followed by a sermon, the blessing by the president of the synagogue, and the final blessing of Numbers 6:24-26.⁶

Any male member of the Jewish community could stand and read the Scriptures at the appointed time, but if a famous person were in attendance, this honor was offered to him. Jesus, because of the fame just alluded to by Luke, was probably invited to read and give the sermon on the passage.

⁶ For the details of synagogue worship in the era of Jesus, see E. Shürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1961).

For the text of the 18 blessings, see W. Förster, *Palestinian Judaism in New Testament Times* (Edinburgh, London: Olives and Boyd, 1964), pp 228-9.

The exact readings from the prophets may not have been specified as were the readings from the Torah for that day. Apparently Isaiah was the prophet chosen, but Jesus was allowed to read the exact passage that He Himself chose. If so, the passage He deliberately chose was Isaiah 61:1 and only the first phrase of verse 2.

“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME

This is the prophet’s justification for his words and actions—he is anointed *by* the LORD (the English translation of יהוה which is the Hebrew Tetragrammaton that stands for the Holy and unpronounced Name of God). The LORD anointed Him with the LORD’s own Holy Spirit—the Spirit of the LORD.

Notice that Luke has twice noted in chapter 4 that the Holy Spirit was active in Jesus.⁷

This synagogue reading by Jesus is only mentioned by Luke. Luke is using this incident to draw a parallel between the prophets, who had the Holy Spirit, and Jesus, Who has the Holy Spirit. There is a definite same pattern in their ministries as we shall note below. The Isaiah reading will show the positive pattern of Jesus’ ministry. The reaction to His sermon will show the pattern of negative reaction that culminated in the Crucifixion.⁸

TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR,

The Gospel is the Good news, the Avedis. It was the prophet’s message and this message was for the ‘poor’. In the original Hebrew that Jesus read from, the word meant *the afflicted*. Isaiah was speaking to people who were oppressed and in bondage. The LXX Greek translation of the Old Testament that Luke used for his Greek quotation had interpreted these afflicted ones as *poor* or pitiful.

Jesus skipped the next phrase in the Isaiah passage, in the same way that He stopped before reading the rest of verse 2. The reason He did this will be noted below. The phrase skipped is “TO BIND UP THE BROKEN HEARTED.”

HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES,

The prophet had been given a proclamation for the poor, pitiful, oppressed captives.

It is a message of release. Though the word had its basis in economics, even by Isaiah’s time, it had taken on a theological connotation.⁹ They were to be released from their sins which had been the root cause of their economic bondage, a bondage that was both a punishment for and a picture of their spiritual enslavement to sin.

Luke’s Greek word for ‘release’ was ἀφεσιν (‘afesin’). In his gospel, Luke uses a verb form of this term 31 times, usually for the forgiveness of sins.¹⁰

AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND,

If you turn in your modern Armenian Bible, or your English Bible, to Isaiah 1:1, you will not find this phrase, but if you happen to have an old Grabar Armenian Bible or a translation based on it, you will find the phrase.

⁷ Luke 4:1, 14

⁸ See footnote 3 above.

⁹ Being carried away as captives was a punishment for sins. Release from captivity indicated the iniquity had been removed. See Isaiah 40:1; Ezekiel 16, esp. v. 63.

For a discussion of the Hebrew דרור, translated ‘release’, and its corresponding Greek term, see *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. III, pp 267-269.

¹⁰ For example: Luke 5:20-21, 23-24; 7:47-49; 11:4; 12:10; 14:3-4; 23:24.

Luke was a Greek speaker and he wrote in Greek. It was natural for him to turn to his Greek Old Testament when he quoted a passage. This Greek Old Testament had been translated several hundred years earlier from a Hebrew *vorlage* that may have been a bit different from that upon which our English texts are based. The old Greek translation is known as the LXX, a form of which was the Bible of the Greek speakers converted by the Apostles. The old Grabar Armenian translation was heavily based on the LXX so Luke's quote in the New Testament will probably match the meaning in the Grabar's Isaiah 1:1.

The English New American Standard Bible reads "AND FREEDOM TO PRISONERS." This literally reads in Hebrew, "OPENING OF THOSE WHO ARE BOUND," which the LXX translator interpreted as 'blind eyes'.¹¹ Jesus read the literal words that stood in the Hebrew text; His explanation would come in the sermon.

Jesus may have pointed out that 'blind eyes,' or other bound organs of perception—in the sense of being unable to understand Truth—is a punishment for sin. The LORD told Isaiah, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking but do not understand.' Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and return and be healed."¹² This punishment was to go on until after the captivity ended.

Now the day has come for restoration of spiritual hearing, sight and understanding.

TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE DOWNTRODDEN,
"Downtrodden" should be understood as *oppressed*.

The Greek wording for this phrase is actually found in Isaiah 58:6. It is thought that Jesus read this additional phrase from Isaiah 58 because He wanted to emphasize the word used for *free*. It has to do with emancipation from slavery.¹³ Again this word has theological connotations for forgiveness, for it too, is translated in the LXX and in Luke as ἀφεσει ('afesei') a form of the Greek word Luke used so often in his Gospel for forgiveness.

Adding this phrase does two things: 1) it emphasizes the mission of forgiveness of sins by repeating the idea. 2) It places the phrase AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND in the center of the statement of what the prophet would do for the 'poor'/ 'afflicted'. It is what the other two statements revolve around. Before they could be forgiven, they would have to *see*, that is, they would need to understand the message of God.

TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD."¹⁴

In Mosaic Law, there were certain years—the favorable year—appointed when all debts must be forgiven.¹⁵ The statement above is a theological allusion to that economic law. The prophet Isaiah was seeing the future time and—as if he were in that future time—was proclaiming that the time for forgiveness had finally come. It was *now*!

And He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down;

The sermon was always given sitting down, so Jesus returned the scroll and sat to explain the passage that He had just read.

¹¹ The Hebrew word פָּתַח underlying "opening" is nuanced as 'open eyes.' See *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1979, p. 824d.

¹² Isaiah 6:10

¹³ In Deuteronomy 6:20-25, this emancipation from slavery predicates that their new Master is the LORD. They have been freed to obey God. See the discussion "The Religious Position of Emancipation," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. V, pp.117-18.

¹⁴ Isaiah 61:1

¹⁵ Leviticus 25; Deuteronomy 15

and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon Him.

This phrase used by Luke to express the congregation's rapt expectation, draws the reader back to the center of the three things that would be done for the poor/afflicted. Their blind eyes would be restored to sight. Now *the eyes* of all in the synagogue of Nazareth were fixed on Jesus. Would they remain blind and not understand, or would they "see" and understand that their very own God was in their midst to teach them and proclaim the good news?

And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The glorious day that the prophet had foreseen and about which he had prophesied was their day. The anointed One that the prophet foreshadowed was here before them. All that the prophecy promised was now, this very day, offered to them. God was prepared then and there to heal their understanding and forgive. It was their choice, would they choose to believe.

We mentioned above that the phrase, "TO BIND UP THE BROKEN HEARTED," was skipped by Jesus. He also stopped reading and did not continue on after the first phrase of verse 2. He omitted these components of the prophecy because they did not apply to the fulfillment that He was announcing that day—the day of Grace, but to the age of His Second Advent and the terrible Day of Judgment.

And all were speaking well of Him, and wondering at the gracious words which were falling from His lips;

The rest of the sermon was not recorded by Luke and we can only imagine how He explained the love of God for them and His great desire to restore them to Himself. Perhaps He explained the fact that God was even at that moment preparing their salvation, the means for their forgiveness. Whatever He said, it was eloquent and gracious. It was impressive, but then another thought flooded their minds.

and they were saying, "Is this not Joseph's son?"

The conjunction "and" is a translation of the Greek *καί*. This Greek conjunction can be also translated as the adverb *but* and should be so translated here. The positive statement about Jesus' gracious words is contrasted with their following question.

"Hold on a minute! We know this man! This can't be the Messiah! This is Joseph's son, right?"

Jesus knows the thoughts of our hearts. The tone of His message changed at their unbelief. They had made their choice.

And He said to them, "No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, 'Physician heal yourself! Whatever we heard was done at Capernaum, do here in your home town as well.' "

Jesus verbalized what He knew they were thinking. The old proverb supposed a sick physician claiming he could heal others. Nobody would believe him unless he healed himself. So if what was being said about Jesus somewhere else was *really* true, he ought to be able to heal the sick in Nazareth, His own town. They wanted proof! But they were sure He wouldn't be able to prove He was the Messiah. They were sure this was just Joseph's son making phony claims.

So what is the answer to our question? Their eyesight was not restored; they remained in their blindness because when they heard the message from God's own lips, they did not believe. In that state they would not find the forgiveness Jesus offered.

Our reading stops at this point, but if we were to read on to the end of Luke's account, we would find that Jesus went on to compare their unbelief to that of their ancestors in the days of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. In those earlier days, God's miracles were wrought, not in Israel, but on behalf of Gentiles. This reminder so angered his listeners that they took Jesus to the brow of a hill to kill Him, foreshadowing what would be the ultimate response to Jesus' ministry. Jesus, ever in control of every situation, at this time simply walked away to continue His ministry elsewhere. When that ministry was completed, He did not choose to walk away, but, instead, submitted to the Cross.

Luke has used this account as one end of a kind of *inclusio*—a set of brackets, in this case, surrounding the ministry of Jesus. The other, the end bracket, is the events of Holy Week ending in the Passion story. Moreover, the Nazareth story is a model of what His ministry would be like: He came to His own to fulfill all that the prophets had promised and foretold, but like the prophets, He was rejected in unbelief. The fathers killed the prophets and the descendants would cry out "Crucify Him!"

APPLICATION

God our Father is in many ways like the mother who stood by the hospital bedside of her little daughter. The child had contracted a virus and her body was reacting violently to it. Huge dark lesions covered her body; all her joints were enormously swollen so that her hands curled inward and appeared as those of a very old and arthritic person. She could not walk or even lift her arms. The mother could only look on in agony, and out of her great love for her child, would have gladly and instantly changed places with her. If it were only possible!

The difference is that our Father could change places with us in the Person of Jesus Christ. The disease humanity has is sin: un-thankfulness and disobedience to God. This disease has changed us and crippled us so that we are no longer the fresh and healthy spiritual persons God created us to be. Standing by our hospital bed, our loving and agonized God changed places and made it possible for us to be released from the grip of the deadly disease. He went to the Cross as Jesus the Christ. But the release in our case can only happen if we are willing to believe the seemingly unbelievable and accept the incredible change of place that happened 2000 years ago.

In our reading for today, Jesus announced to the amazed congregation in Nazareth that the longed for day of God's great "release", the day when their sins as a nation would be forgiven, the day of restoration to God, had finally arrived. The prophets, who had foretold the promised day to their forefathers, had been rejected. Now, Jesus was also rejected by the people. In the continuation of the story, they tried to kill Jesus just as their forefathers had killed the prophets. Later on, their national rulers would reject Jesus and His message. But then, because it was the appointed time, Christ would allow Himself to be crucified for the sins of the world—to make the great Release, the great Forgiveness possible. Neither the rejection of the people of Nazareth nor that of their religious leaders halted God's program, or the fulfillment of the promised day for all those who believed and turned in faith to Christ.

The day of salvation that Jesus announced in the synagogue of Nazareth has not passed. For 2000 years, He has held back the sun from setting on this great day of opportunity. He will not hold it back forever. Those of us who have heard God's message and have

believed Him have a mission as well. We have a huge responsibility to those of our family, our friends, our neighbors, our community, and our world who are still in the blindness of unbelief. We have the good news and it is for them!

Our mission is to so live with our gracious words and our loving actions that we might lead them to the Truth—that in believing it, the eyes of their understanding might be opened at last and they will find the forgiveness and restoration that Jesus offers to the glory of our One God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May He empower us, even in the face of rejection, to fulfill our mission as He directs, today and tomorrow and all our days, until we rest at last, victorious in Him.