

Through a Jubilee Lens

A sermon based on Luke 4:14-21

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This summer my older brothers and I attended the reunion of three school districts – the Stony Lake, Garthland, and Lac Chavel school districts, stretched out along the North Saskatchewan River, just north of Duck Lake. All three one-room schools have long since passed out of existence. In fact, the school I attended shut down in 1959. The reunion proved more interesting than I thought it would be. My family moved away from the district some forty years ago, but many of our former neighbours still live there, stubbornly farming land that was never meant to be farmed! Now, however, they have electricity, telephones, and even the odd satellite dish.

I was young when our family moved from the district, so most people had to be coached to remember me, and then I was inundated with lots of diminutive names that I'm not going to share with you. Suffice it to say that I was cute then. Since most of the people in the community are either Mennonites, Anglicans, or tolerant pagans, the reunion closed with a worship service. I was not asked to speak at the service, but my brother was, and I felt for him. It must be a difficult experience speaking to people with whom you grew up and whose childhood peccadilloes you know intimately. Even worse, these are people intimately acquainted with your childhood peccadilloes!

Jesus Addresses the Hometown Crowd

Jesus had a similar experience, as Luke tells it early on in his Gospel. He had left the home district some time ago, and then reports began filtering back about his activities up there in Capernaum (Luke 4:23). They were hearing good things about him. Luke tells us that news of him "spread through all the surrounding country," that he taught "in their synagogues and was praised by everyone." (4:14-15)

And then, Luke tells us, "he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up" (4:16). He showed up at the synagogue, and because he was a rabbi, he was asked to read a portion of Scripture. The synagogue service had three readings; there was a psalm and a selection from one of the books of Moses – both of those texts were assigned for the day – and another reading from the prophets. The text from the prophet, however, was the choice of the reader. Jesus asked for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, unrolled it to the 61st chapter, and began to read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...." (4:18)

I wonder what was in the minds of those who sat in the synagogue and listened to him. Malachi, the tailor, probably leaned over to Hezekiah, and whispered, "Isn't that the carpenter's son?" Two seats back, Jacob, the shopkeeper, was smiling to himself and thinking, "Ahh, yes, young Yeshua, Yosef and Miriam's boy, it's good to have him back home." In the back, Ezekiel, the sheep-herder, said to his companion, "He reads so well, and with such authority! I wonder where he picked that up? His father hardly ever muttered a word!" Another was thinking, "Fifty, a hundred times I've been in that carpenter shop and seen him running around; who would have thought?"

No doubt some were proud and took delight in him, thinking, "he's one of our own." Others noticed that he'd changed since leaving home. There was something different about him; they couldn't put their finger on it, but just his ease at reading Scripture and announcing its fulfillment amazed them.

No doubt others listened to him with some chagrin, wondering, "Just because he caused quite a stir up there in Capernaum, we're supposed to be impressed! Well, this ain't Capernaum, Yeshua."

There is nothing in today's Gospel reading to indicate the predominant mood of Jesus' hometown reception, but Part 2 of the story will be read next Sunday, and if we take a peek we discover that it's a mixed mood. At first, says Luke, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (Luke 4:22). Another translation reads, "Everybody noticed what he said and was amazed at the beautiful words that came from his lips, and they kept saying, 'Isn't this Joseph's son?'" (4:22, Phillips) Which of course, could be interpreted two ways, either as impressed amazement, or as disbelieving amazement. Anyway, something went wrong in the interchange that followed, and soon, Luke tells us, "...all in the synagogue were filled with rage" (4:28). Probably the first reported case of church or synagogue rage! Whatever happened, the reception was less than favourable; in fact, they "drove him out of the town" (4:29), ready to throw him off the nearest cliff! All four gospels agree on this report of his hometown reception, and Matthew adds that "No prophet goes unhonoured except in his own country and in his own home!" (Matthew 13:57, Phillips) Jesus then returned to teach in Capernaum, received a warm reception there (Luke 4:31-32), and continued on in his ministry.

Another Photographer's Lens

The Scripture lessons during the season of Epiphany focus on Jesus' life and ministry, and last Sunday we looked at John's introduction to Jesus' public ministry, noting that he captured Jesus through the lens of a wedding photographer. John uses a wedding to set the tone for his story of Jesus' public ministry, using this festive occasion to stress the covenant relationship of love at the heart of every marriage relationship and, indeed, at the heart of the gospel.

I also mentioned that each Gospel writer looks at Jesus in his own distinctive manner, and I can imagine Luke adjusting the lens of his own metaphorical camera so as to present to his distinctive audience the full import of the Jesus story. Like John, Luke could have used the wedding at Cana to frame Jesus' significance, but there were many stories current about Jesus, and Luke chose another setting to set the tone for his Gospel. He chose a hometown story, set in a synagogue, and steeped in tradition. If John dipped into metaphor to frame his Gospel, Luke dipped into Old Testament prophecy.

The power to frame a story is an important one. An architect once told a friend, "I can take the newest building, built by the finest builders anywhere in the world, and if you give me a camera and the ability to focus various lenses, I can make that building look like it's about to fall down because I will find five or six minor imperfections, focus on them and convince you that the entire structure is about to topple." (story told by Donald Keough)

I think that Luke realized his power to focus the gospel story, and he wanted his opening story firmly rooted in Scripture. The hometown story represents Jesus' inauguration. The present inauguration of a new American president comes only after months of preparation, not just policy meetings and appointments, but before that the election, and the counting of votes, and the counting of votes, and the counting of votes... Similarly, it took a while for Jesus' program to come into focus, and Luke mentions several things that lead up to the hometown meeting. There is the usual biographical sketch of his birth, adolescent years (Luke 1 and 2) and family history (4:23-38), followed by his baptism (3:21-22) and a time of testing in the wilderness (4:1-13). The temptations story helps to clarify what Jesus' ministry is not about, but Luke also spends a fair bit of time outlining the program of John the Baptist (3:1-20), at whose hands Jesus was baptized.

Later in Luke's Gospel the followers of John the Baptist come to Jesus to check him out, prompting Jesus to share his perception of John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." (Luke 7:24-26)

Luke also positions Jesus in the prophetic tradition. Jesus, in choosing his reading, cast his lot with the prophets, reading a particularly potent passage from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." (Luke 4:18-19)

Sharpening the Focus

This week I finally received my new glasses, after keeping the old ones together with glue and tape for well nigh a month. As usual, my eyes were tested before the new glasses were fitted with a prescription, and as I looked through some complex optical equipment, the optometrist kept giving me choices. Looking at a blurry jumble of letters and numbers, which I thought I'd memorized by now, he kept asking me, "With which lens is your vision sharper? With number 1? Or number 2? With A? or B?" And after an interminable number of choices he arrived at the set of lenses, or filters, that provides me with the sharpest vision possible at the moment. Of course, it always looks sharper in the optometrist's chair, with his equipment, than it does with actual glasses, but when I asked him if I could come there to do my reading, he was not amused.

A Positive and Hopeful Lens

Nonetheless, I think Luke was using a series of lenses, or filters, to bring Jesus' identity and mission into focus. Allow me to deconstruct his gospel prescription, if you will. Luke uses several different lenses to come up with his prescription, and one of them is a lens that sharpens the positive and hopeful hue of what we see. It's just a small filter, but I think it's significant, for the passage from Isaiah that Jesus read in the Nazareth synagogue was a slightly modified version of the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Isaiah. For one thing, Jesus omits the negative phrase in Isaiah concerning "the day of vengeance of our God," an omission that re-focuses the reading on grace and hope. Jesus reads the part about the year of the Lord's favour, but not the part about the day of vengeance.

A Wide-angle Lens

Secondly, Luke is using a wide-angle lens to focus the gospel. It's not accidental that Luke starts in Jesus' hometown. Perhaps like our own prime minister's constituents, Jesus' hometown family and friends expected some special favours, but as we shall see in next week's Gospel Jesus would have no part in ethnic favouritism. Luke is at pains to show that the Jesus story is much broader than Nazareth, broader than Galilee, broader than Israel! The reason his hometown's mood may have turned from pride to rage is that Jesus pointed out that the Old Testament Elijah could have gone to any number of widows during the Great Drought, but he chose to go to a Gentile widow (Luke 4:25-26). He also pointed out that of all the lepers that went to Elisha to be healed, only the Gentile leper was healed. (4:27)

Jesus' hometowners were not pleased with this broad, ecumenical approach. After all, "Charity begins at home. You know how others treat us, so we have to take care of our own." As we know, however, Jesus' charity was inspired by human need, irrespective of race or religion. It's a theme that Luke promotes throughout his Gospel, as in his famous story of the Good Samaritan!

A Servant Lens

A third filter used by Luke to sharpen the focus of the gospel message is a servant lens, for the text read by Jesus is closely related to the so-called "Servant Songs" of Isaiah. These are passages set in the period of Babylonian exile (Isaiah 40-55), in which Israel is reminded of her mission to the world (41:8- 11; 42:1-4) – to be a light to the nations (49:5-11). Mindful of the grace they had experienced, they were encouraged to extend it to others, to "...loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, ...to share...bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into (their homes)...." (Isaiah 58:6-7).

Jesus' choice of reading indicates his acceptance of the role of the servant described in Isaiah. Not surprising, then, that he tells his followers, "the greatest among (us) must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves" (Luke 22:26), and gives integrity to the message by himself donning the garment of a lowly servant and washing and drying his disciples' feet (John 13).

A Jubilee Lens

Luke adds a fourth filter to his gospel prescription, signalled by the phrase, the "year of the Lord's favour". It's the phrase used by Isaiah, but it has its roots in the Old Testament book of Leviticus (25). Levitical regulations held that every fiftieth year in Israel was to be proclaimed a Year of the Lord's Favour, or Year of Jubilee, as it is otherwise known. According to Leviticus, this special year has three essential features: 1) It is to be a year of rest for the land, which is to remain fallow that year; 2) There is to be a return of ancestral possessions to those who had been compelled to sell them because of poverty; and 3) liberty is proclaimed to all Israelites who are in bondage to their fellow citizens.

Every fifty years a blast from the ram's horn proclaimed "liberty throughout Israel," a wonderful and welcome sound to those, for example, who had been compelled by poverty or bankruptcy to sell themselves into indentured service. The Jubilee Year is an ingenious concept that could, for example, prevent the development of a poverty culture, but alas, it appears that people in those days didn't know any better than we "how much"

constitutes enough. They also hedged their bets by considering these Jubilee provisions valid only when all Jews are resident in Israel; and just in case there was a danger of that happening, they also stipulated that each tribe should be resident in its original territory.

Though the human impulse to hoard one's wealth appeared to continue as unfettered then as it is now, the Jubilee idea was never lost from biblical imagination. It was brought back to prominence by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Nehemiah, and Jesus returned it to prominence yet again centuries later. And if there was resistance to it being implemented in practical, economic terms, it nonetheless remained a hope, a compelling hope of a glorious and future time when ill fortunes will be reversed! If not now, then when the Messiah comes! And like the biblical idea of shalom, the Jubilee idea – the year of the Lord's favour – became a all-encompassing idea, far broader than any economic equalization plan.

Many Christians today are exploring what it means to live by Jubilee principles, exploring everything from global movements to cancel debilitating international debt to experiments in land trusts, community reinvestment, and alternative uses of capital and wealth distribution. To present the gospel through a Jubilee lens weaves together economic and ecological justice, work and rest, body and spirit. For those of us who think the gospel is apolitical, Luke wants to say that it's much more political than you think; for those of us who think it's only political, Luke wants to say that it's much more spiritual than you think. Jubilee is part of the covenant code – the promise between God and Israel enacted at Mount Sinai – a code designed to help a community of people live in right relationship – with God, with each other, and with creation.

A Powerful Prescription

The passage that Jesus read in his hometown is a very important text which Jesus used to interpret his own ministry. It became established very early as a favourite source used by the Christian community to interpret his ministry. These words are not merely the dead words of a dead prophet or a Dead Prophets' Society, they endured over centuries, and took on added potency in Jesus' mouth. Prophecy, like poetry, to co-opt T.S. Eliot's phrase, "attempts to turn (words) into blood."

I want to say, finally, that the lenses Luke arranges to present the gospel is a powerful prescription. The language itself is potent – to "bring good news to the poor," to "proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind," "to let the oppressed go free" – this is language sure to raise high and radical expectations! Annie Dillard, an author I just discovered this summer, writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? ... The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up batches of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews." (Teaching a Stone to Talk)

Sharpening the Church's Focus

Luke built a theology of the church from his shaping of the Gospel traditions, and so his interpretation of Jesus gives us a good idea of what Luke thinks to be the role of the Church. How can we use Luke's view of Jesus' mission – and therefore ours, for we are his body (1 Corinthians 12) – to sharpen the Church's focus?

We admire someone with a sharp wit, and think it worth our time to sharpen our skills, be it our speaking skills, our listening skills, or our leadership and networking skills. Similarly, it may help us to be a better and more faithful body of Christ if we use Luke's Gospel to sharpen our focus. "Sharpen your pool game and become a virtual hustler," I read in a recent advertisement. "Sharpen your grasp of the gospel and become a virtual Christian," we might paraphrase. To do so would help the image of Christ spring more quickly and clearly to mind when people observe us.

Let me suggest just a few things that relate to the gospel lenses Luke provides. One has to do with Jesus' de-emphasis on vengeance. Just a few years ago former American President Jimmy Carter was asked by the magazine, Christianity Today, how Christians can bring about change, to which he replied, "The obvious answer is to follow the standards and priorities that were established by Jesus Christ." To which he added, "I would put an emphasis on forgiveness and accommodation. We have a very harsh society now. It's almost totally devoted to punishment. (When) I was governor of Georgia over twenty years ago," he said, "(we) governors were competing with each other over who could have the fewest people in prison and the most aggressive program rehabilitating inmates. Now the governors brag about how many prison cells they're building."

We live in a very litigious society, a society beset by road rage, air rage, and every other kind of rage. After all, think of the many bad things that could happen if we repressed our anger. Increasingly, we have a low threshold for frustration. A surly sense of entitlement is a popular attitude. Releasing captives, willy-nilly, may seem a naive approach, but because Christians have taken these words of Jesus seriously, some very creative and healing approaches to crime have come into being.

On Friday night our family watched the movie, Seven, a brutal and disturbing story of seven murders around the theme of the "seven deadly sins". At the conclusion of the movie, the narrator quotes Ernest Hemingway, "The world is a fine place, and worth fighting for." (For Whom the Bell Tolls, 1942) Says the weary detective, "I agree with the second part."

Christians are no less realistic, but slightly more hopeful. Vaclav Havel, poet, philosopher, and president of the Czech Republic, speaking out of years of oppression, said, "I am not an optimist, because I am not sure that everything ends well. Nor am I a pessimist, because I am not sure everything ends badly. I just carry hope in my heart.... I cannot imagine that I could strive for something if I did not carry hope in me. I am thankful to God for this gift. It is as big a gift as life itself."

May our hopes, individual and corporate, be shaped by the gospel, and may they inspire beautiful and courageous expressions of faithfulness.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.