

Although all three synoptic gospels record this story, Luke places this synagogue sermon near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry and soon after Jesus’ wilderness experience. This sermon from the young preacher is his mission statement for what his life will be about. It was a sermon not well received. A few verses after today’s text ends, Jesus is driven out of town. I suspect that what made Jesus able to preach this sermon was those days spent in the wilderness in a process of deep discernment at the end of which the divine spirit fills Jesus with the purpose for his life.

Jesus wasn’t out to win a popularity contest with this sermon; he wasn’t going to be in demand as a guest preacher; he wasn’t going to please his family and friends in his hometown. He draws deeply from the well of the prophets of old who were “in tune” with the Spirit of God, who knew the heart of God; who spoke the truth of God. He quotes 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 favor.*

And then this young, bold preacher, sits down and while everyone is stunned and looking at him, he says: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* It is sometimes suggested that Jesus is proclaiming the year of Jubilee, that every 50 year event when debts were forgiven, land taken to pay debts were returned to the original owner, slaves were freed, and the earth was given a holiday from planting so that even the soil could renew and restore its fruitfulness.

Perhaps this did coincide with the Jubilee year. Or perhaps Jesus is saying: don’t wait any longer for what can BE now; live God’s dream today; don’t put it off in the future; every year/every day is an chance for God’s Jubilee to become real. Jesus brings through the words of the prophets Israel’s past to meet the future expectation of God’s Jubilee in this very moment, a kairos moment when the congregation is asked to decide “will God’s reign live today in your hearts, in your congregation, and in your world; will the poor hear a word of good news, will those bound be released of whatever holds them back, will those who cannot see (literally or spiritually) be able to see again, will those who society presses down be given a chance for full and free lives, will God’s favor overcome the depression of the current age.

Well, first the congregation in the synagogue that day were stunned; then they managed a few compliments for Joseph’s son. But Jesus wasn’t preaching for compliments; Jesus had just been through the wilderness where one is stripped of life’s extras and has the opportunity to find the Holy. His rebuke to the congregates of his synagogue seems to me to be more a realization that the “hometown crowd” will never hear his words because they are focused on his being Joseph’s little boy.

Joseph’s boy is welcomed for his poise in public speaking; but his prophetic words are not. One who says to them, “don’t wait, do it now, don’t make excuses, shout out the year of God’s favor to one and all today!” is not received cordially. The hometown supporters quickly turn on Joseph’s boy who dares to criticize his elders, and he is forced to go elsewhere to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. But he takes with him this mission statement, and wherever he goes for the rest of his life, Jesus is *bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and setting free the oppressed. He is proclaiming that today is the day, the year, yea, even the moment to receive God's favor.*

For those of us who believe that Jesus teaches us life-giving words, this mission statement by which he lived and died, informs *our* mission statement both as individuals and as church. On this Annual Meeting Sunday we do our business as church. Yes, we are in the world and we organize ourselves from that setting, but our work is not the world's work. So as we meet today and as we begin a new decade, we hold ourselves up to the mission statement proclaimed by the Great Teacher. Today is a day to discern how we've done, decide what we will do, and move forward with determination.

It's important to discern our past year's work because the propensity to repeat the past is so great. We discern not to "pat ourselves on the back" or "beat ourselves up" but to have accountability. And it is important to move forward with determination, to aspire, to dream new visions, and to ponder the possibilities, what we process theologians know as being open to novelty.

And so we ask the questions: How have we brought good news to the poor? How have we proclaimed release to the captives? How have we helped the blind see? How have we set free the oppressed? How have we proclaimed God's dream for the world? I would suggest that these questions are for us as individuals as well as for us collectively as church. Individually we have different and unique gifts. We come together as church to be inspired and encouraged but our proclamation may be of our unique making as we go from this place scattered in places of work, home, or school.

Some responses to our mission are more obvious than others; such as, our ministry to those in need of food and our gifts of healing through supportive and healing ministries, One Great Hour of Sharing and Neighbors in Need. But some answers to our yearly report card invite reflection such as:

***How have I/we been attentive to people who are oppressed financially, culturally, or spiritually? How have I/we helped to free those in captivity of their own emotional/spiritual prisons?*** Our mission to self-help groups is one way. Everyday we have an AA meeting using our Tangeman Hall.

***How have I/we proclaimed through the witness of our lives that today, this moment, is one blessed by God's favor and this moment is a new beginning?***

There is not just ONE way to fulfill this mission statement but many. Each of us is one piece of this puzzle we call church, and every single piece is important. And the sum of the whole is even greater than the individual parts by themselves.

Jesus was able to preach that sermon because the divine Spirit was within him. We pray today that the divine Spirit fall afresh on us, that it will guide our thinking and doing. I suggest that as we begin a new decade we ponder these words from Jim's song *Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness*: ***You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes, from the bondage of sorrow the captives dream dreams; Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes. With bold new decisions your people arise.***

May this be so!