

Scripture Readings for January 23, 2022

Nehemiah 8:1-8 (Selected verses)

¹All the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. ²So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law. ⁵Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁸They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

Luke 4:14-30

¹⁴Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

²⁰Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they asked. ²³Jesus said to them, "Surely you will quote this proverb to me: 'Physician, heal yourself!' And you will tell me, 'Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.'" ²⁴"Truly I tell you," he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown.

²⁵I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian." ²⁸All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. ²⁹They got up, drove him out of the town, and took him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw him off the cliff. ³⁰But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.

Sermon “What’s the ‘Good News?’”

The Gospel writers begin their accounts of the *ministry* of Jesus in different ways. Last week I talked about the wedding of Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine.¹ That extravagant miracle is how John kicks off Christ’s ministry; Mark begins with an exorcism.² Luke’s account, as we just heard, begins with a sermon at Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth.³ By this time, Jesus had become a travelling *teacher*⁴ in the region of Galilee, customarily speaking in the town synagogue, and we are told that what he said was well-received.⁵ In fact, Luke stresses that Jesus was “filled with the power of the Spirit,”⁶ and this means that God’s presence was with him in a *prophetic* way and that’s why his ministry proved to be popular. And this begs the question, what was it that Jesus *said* that merited the people’s praise? Put differently why do all the Gospel writers say that the teaching of Jesus was “good news,” which is what the word “gospel” means? What’s *good* about it? Someone today might reply:

- “The good news is that we are going to heaven (and not hell!)” The trouble with that response is there’s *no* evidence 1st century Jews were fixated with the question: “What happens to you after you die?” Consequently, that’s *not* why Jesus’ message was considered good news.
- OK, how about: “The good news is that God loves us!” Again, Jesus primarily taught Jews, who *already* believed they were God’s special, chosen people, so that reply is not convincing either.
- Maybe, “The good news is that we are *forgiven!*” We are getting a little warmer here, in that Christians believe that through Jesus’ death and resurrection we find divine forgiveness. However, Jesus *didn’t* publicly teach that.⁷

So, let’s look carefully at Jesus’ teaching, as recorded by Luke, to discover *why* it was considered good news. But before we do so, let’s remind ourselves what happened in a synagogue. In a typical Sabbath service, the Shema would be proclaimed, namely: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.”⁸ And that would be followed by reciting the Ten Commandments. There would also be psalms, prayers,

¹ John 1:1-11; see also: <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Gods-Gracious-Extravagance.pdf> .

² See Mark 1:21-28; <https://seureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/The-Authority-of-Jesus-in-Word-and-Deed.pdf> .

³ Luke 4:14-30. Matthew also begins with the Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5-7; see also Matt 4:23-25. Note: Luke’s account of Jesus preaching at Nazareth is based on the parallel account in Mark 6:1-6 that he combines that with other sources. Clearly, Luke did not find Mark’s account adequate.

⁴ Luke stresses Jesus as teacher, rather than preacher.

⁵ Luke 4:15-16. In doing so, the Gospel writers are affirming that Jesus honoured the Sabbath, scriptures, and synagogues.

⁶ Luke 4:14; see also 4:1; 3:22; 2:52; 1:35. The Holy Spirit’s enabling is a key theme in Luke-Acts. In the Old Testament, prophets and kings were also described in similar terms and so this description would resonate with Luke’s readers. Jesus’ *messiahship* will soon become evident, i.e., Jesus was more than a prophet in Luke’s mind.

⁷ In some situations, Jesus did proclaim the forgiveness of sins (e.g., Mark 2:1-12; Matt 9:1-8; Luke 5:17-26; 7:48; cf. Matt 26:27-28), but it’s not a key feature in, say, the Sermon on the Mount. But the *lack* of sacrifices in Christian worship can only be explained as Jesus’ death being the *final* sacrifice and the means of divine forgiveness, so replacing the mosaic law. (In addition, still others would express the “good news” using the more complex language of Paul, with little reference to the gospel writers themselves!)

⁸ See Deut 6:4-5.

and blessings (or benedictions). And the law and the prophets from the Old Testament would be read in Hebrew from a scroll, followed by an explanation in Aramaic, the common spoken language. This was a 500-year-old tradition that went as far back as Nehemiah, as we heard in the Old Testament reading.⁹ All this was administered by lay people, not professionals, which likely included pious pharisees. Jesus then, having a growing reputation as an inspired teacher, was asked to read and interpret the scriptures in his hometown synagogue.¹⁰

Luke says Jesus chose the reading from Isaiah 61, which was already widely understood to be about the Messiah. Incidentally, Luke feels quite at liberty to edit the prophet's words! He omits certain clauses in chapter 61¹¹ and adds a line from Isaiah 58:6.¹² Luke uses this passage to define Jesus' *whole* teaching and ministry. Everything that follows in Luke's Gospel points back to this brief sermon.¹³ At the risk of boring you by repetition, Jesus says: "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."¹⁴

First, those three "*me's*" are emphatic, but you might think I'm being dramatic and inserting my tone into the way Jesus read the text. However, recall that the man was required to *stand* to read the holy Scriptures and it was customary to subsequently *sit* to teach and interpret them. Luke states that it was following the expectant, pregnant pause while Jesus was sitting that he said, "*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."¹⁵ Jesus is therefore announcing to his hometown folk, the Messiah has come, it's *me*!¹⁶ I am God's anointed one and my role is to realize this long-expected promise of God. That's pretty stunning, I think, and bound to provoke a reaction!

Second, that promise is to bring good news the poor, release to those oppressed, restore sight to the blind, both physically and spiritually, and to announce that God's salvation – or God's amnesty and restoration - has finally come. Put another way, God's liberating kingdom is *now* about to begin.¹⁷ God's reign is here; change begins *now*, says Jesus. *That*, says Luke, is what the good news is all about!

⁹ Neh 8:1-3, 5-6, 8 (c. 500 BC). No sacrifices would be offered, as that needed a priest and only occurred at the temple in Jerusalem. (All it took to form a synagogue was ten men, so local communities would have one; towns may have a school, a community center, and a place to administer justice and distribute alms - all linked to the synagogue.)

¹⁰ By the 1st century there was a fixed cycle of triennial readings from the Torah (cf. the Lectionary today), but arguments that readings from the prophets were also fixed by this date are inconclusive. (There was usually more than one reader, and each would be expected to read at least three verses.)

¹¹ He omits the judgement clause in Isa 61:2b ("... and the day of vengeance of our God."), cf. Luke 3:17.

¹² Luke also alters verb tenses too. (Whatever the "inspiration of Scripture" might mean, it wasn't rigid for fossilized.)

¹³ For example, see Luke 7:18-23 (cf. Acts 2:22; 10:37-38). This sermon in Nazareth may not be chronologically accurate, but Luke's uses this incident to programmatically introduce the mission of Jesus – it's a new *paradigm*.

¹⁴ Luke 4:18-19, citing Isa 61:1-2a, 58:6; cf. 42:7. (For Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor, see Lev 25, esp. v10.)

¹⁵ Luke 4:21. "Today" is word Luke uses frequently (12 times), e.g., Luke 2:11; 13:32-33; 19:5, 9; 23:43.

¹⁶ The mention of the "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me" and the "anointed me" leaves no doubt, along with the prior messianic understanding of that text. Moreover, in Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:21-22), Jesus has been declared God's Son, which itself is effectively a messianic reference (see also Luke 1:32; 2:11, 28-32).

¹⁷ See Luke 4:43 where Jesus says, "I must proclaim the *good news of the kingdom of God* to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose."

Note how this message is very down to earth and practical; indeed, Luke has a great deal to say about those who are poor or disadvantaged in his Gospel.¹⁸ Any act that addresses their needs is therefore kingdom of God work, whether that's giving warm gloves and scarves in winter to giving money for animals to World Vision, all the way to trying to change the economic and political systems that create and perpetuate world poverty. This also links with "releasing the oppressed," which includes the systemic reasons for debt as well as those suffering injustice of all kinds. (It's timely we're reading these words the same week that Americans celebrate the contributions of Martin Luther King, Jr.) Likewise, the exorcism accounts in the Gospels are another graphic example of release from captivity and oppression, along with miraculous healing of physical conditions. So when Jesus later restores the sight to the blind,¹⁹ he is fulfilling God's work as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah.²⁰ The essence of the messiah's work is then *to set free*²¹ and when that happens, in either incremental or dramatic ways, God's kingdom is being advanced. Note that this message is much broader than forgiveness of sin and the removal of shame, important though that is. It's about caring for the whole person, about social justice, and valuing what God values – including creation. In one way, this gospel message is much *simpler* than we think, although it's admittedly hard to implement. And the church can make it over complicated or purely spiritual to avoid the sheer everyday practicality and discipline of loving God and neighbor. Moreover, we often find it difficult to live out because this challenges our own lifestyle and habits. Being honest about that fact, and being self-aware, are the first steps on this journey of restoration of what broken in our world and in ourselves. Jesus' message of liberation and restoration is both for us *and* for those in need around us.

Over the next few chapters, Luke presents Jesus as fulfilling that expectation from Isaiah and, in the book of Acts, Luke continues with that theme in the life of the early church. They understood that following Jesus meant working to realize that gospel vision - inspired and empowered by that same Holy Spirit that enabled Jesus. And that's what *we* are also called to do. Recall Jesus said, "*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled." It's always "today," never yesterday or tomorrow; there's *still* work to be done. So let's pause and look around: What needs restoring? What can we influence? While it is good to think boldly, to make this realistic, I want to encourage us to begin with small missions, tasks, ventures that align with the restorative nature of God's kingdom and the giftedness and resources of this Church community. We can too easily be overwhelmed by the social need and so be paralyzed into inactivity. Yet I believe every little bit of good we do counts, and that can be amplified when we work together. Whatever we do in that regard is *never* wasted in God's economy. So let's seize the day!

Going back to the story, what was the reaction in Nazareth to what Jesus said? It was mixed. They were initially amazed to hear of God's *grace* rather than God's judgement, as John the Baptist had

¹⁸ See Luke 1: 52-53; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 21:3.

¹⁹ See Luke 7:21-22; 18:35.

²⁰ Isa 35:5-6; 42:7. Restoring sight to those who are blind is so that they can *see* what *God* is doing!

²¹ Forgiveness from this perspective is, then, release from bondage to sin; a relationship with God is restored.

preached.²² That's a very important distinction of which we must not lose sight.²³ Even so, the hometown reaction was ultimately one of unbelief because Jesus wouldn't perform miracles just to prove his messianic identity to them. That's *not* how God's grace works! Jesus responds, "Let me tell you the truth, prophets never get accepted in their own hometown."²⁴ And then he explains how their unbelief reminds him of the same skepticism in Elijah's and Elisha's day, so much so that their miracles of divine grace were bestowed upon certain *non-Jews* rather than to Jews.²⁵ That mention of the *inclusiveness* of God's grace really riled up Christ's audience and they immediately wanted to kill him as a false prophet.²⁶ But now was not the time for Jesus to die and he – ironically - miraculously escaped to continue on with his divine mission. But this initial reaction at the beginning of Christ's ministry also describes his ministry as a whole. Jesus was not only rejected in his hometown,²⁷ Luke later goes on to reveal that Jesus was also rejected by his own people, his fellow Jews – not all of them, of course, but certainly by those in power.²⁸ The reaction to Jesus and his message will be equally mixed today, but let's not be discouraged by that fact; rather, let's simply anticipate it and continue to move forward.

A key take-home message for us today is to remember that God's radical grace is never subject to the limitations and boundaries of any nation, race, group, or even a church.²⁹ Yes, we may be instruments of God's grace for others, but we are never at liberty to set limits on *who* may receive that amazing grace.³⁰ Those who would try to exclude others end up excluding themselves. The paradox of this good news is, then, that the unlimited grace it offers can, if we are not careful, be so offensive to *us* that *we're* not able to receive it.³¹ And that begs the question: How much more might God be able to do among us if we were ready to transcend the boundaries and limits that we ourselves have erected? That's something for us all to consider.

My final point today is that if we are honest, as we look at the intervening history, we *can* get disheartened. Why is it taking so long for this vision to be realized? We are not alone in such thoughts. What many 1st century Jews longed for, including John the Baptist, was sweeping reform and the restoration of Israel. But that didn't happen in the way they expected. Nevertheless, the New Testament writers were all convinced that messianic age *did* come and *is* here, but not as dramatically

²² Cf. Luke 4:22a and 3:7-14.

²³ See [11]. Luke later tells us that even John the Baptist was surprised by that (see Luke 7:18-23).

²⁴ Luke 4:24, which puts Jesus firmly in the prophetic tradition. ("Hometown" could also be "home country.") See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Familiarity-Breeds-Contempt.pdf>.

²⁵ Luke 4:24-27; see also 1 Kings 17-18; 2 Kings 5:1-24.

²⁶ Luke 4:28-29; cf. Deut 13:5; Acts 7:58; 14:19.

²⁷ The good news can provoke a reaction because it *is* shocking!

²⁸ There seems to be some literary foreshadowing – even a warning - here in Luke's retelling of this incident, which will be further developed in Acts (e.g., Paul's ministry to the gentiles). Observe that Jesus *doesn't* go elsewhere because he is rejected; he's rejected because he goes elsewhere.

²⁹ Christian exclusivity (denomination, theology, etc.) is just as prevalent and dangerous as 1st century Jewish exclusivism.

³⁰ As the old hymn puts it. "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy." See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kamADrIPEDs>.

³¹ Particularly, if we are inclined to hold on to God's blessing for ourselves and expect divine judgement to be dished out on those we don't like.

or as swiftly as they - or we - sometimes wish. It's still a work in progress. Luke later tells us that John the Baptist also doubted and sent his followers to Jesus to double check whether Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah or were they to wait for someone else. Luke writes: "At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to John's messengers, 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.'"³² John the Baptist would have recognized this as fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Although this was not John's experience, nevertheless this liberation was occurring where Jesus and his followers, empowered by the Spirit, were active. Let's therefore not be discouraged but recognize the incremental things God is doing among us today. Amen. Let us pray.

³² Luke 7:21-22. And v23 continues: "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."