

SCRIPTURE:

Luke 4:14-22a (New Revised Standard Version):

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

Luke 4:22b-30 (The Voice translation):

But then all the people kept saying: Wait. This is only the son of Joseph, right? Jesus responded: You’re about to quote the old proverb to Me, “Doctor, heal yourself!” Then you’re going to ask Me to prove Myself to you by doing the same miracles I did in Capernaum. But face the truth: hometowns always reject their homegrown prophets. Think back to the prophet Elijah. There were many needy Jewish widows in his homeland, Israel, when a terrible famine persisted there for three and a half years. Yet the only widow God sent Elijah to help was an outsider from Zarephath in Sidon. It was the same with the prophet Elisha. There were many Jewish lepers in his homeland, but the only one he healed—Naaman—was an outsider from Syria. The people in the synagogue became furious when He said these things. They seized Jesus, took Him to the edge of town, and pushed Him right to the edge of the cliff on which the city was built. They would have pushed Him off and killed Him, but He passed through the crowd and went on His way.

SERMON: “Hard Truth” The Rev. Brent Damrow

I imagine that the place Jesus went, his hometown synagogue, was a place that held memory. It was a place of gathering for the people there. And I bet it was a place dripping with faith.

There is something about our sanctuary, isn’t there? I still remember the very first time I ever came into this room. I came in through those doors from the Jonathan Edward Room. And I was struck by something in this room. Something tangible. Something that immediately felt like home. There’s much to love about this space, isn’t there? There is that light that just streams in. It is a spacious but cozy room. It is simple yet elegant. It is sturdy and enduring, architecturally and theologically. It’s a wonderful space. And yet I know that what makes this room special, the tangible essence of why this room matters, goes way beyond that.

My reaction is the same that I’ve heard over and over again from some people who have called this place home for decades, and for some who walk through the door for the first time. And

especially for those who are dealing with things beyond themselves, beyond their control, something heavy in their lives. I've heard how walking into this room matters. And they tell me they were struck by this room before they heard a single note from the organ, a single song from the choir, or any words spoken by anyone.

I know that when I walked through those doors for the first time, this room was quiet. And yet, although I was the only person in the room, I knew in that moment that this room was far from empty. There is something tangible in the air. You can feel it. It got me wondering.

Jesus was there in that place of worship in his own hometown. It was on this day, the Sabbath day, a day set aside to remember who we are and to whom we belong. And with the fullness of their lives, with all of the complications and all of the joys of being alive, Luke tells us the people came. And there in that moment they came face to face with Jesus. Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit when he came. He was fresh out of his experience in the wilderness, and the Spirit emanated from him.

And so when he stood up in worship, when people noticed him, when their attention was firmly on him, an attendant walked over and handed him a scroll. Implicit in that invitation was the invitation to read, the invitation to teach. Speak to us, Jesus. And Luke tells us that Jesus did not disappoint. He took that scroll from Isaiah, and Luke tells us that he looked until he found the place that he wanted to read, the place that the Spirit was telling him to read. It was a passage full of wholeness and possibility.

What's clear about Luke's testimony is that there was something in the way that he read that drew those people that knew him so well, that drew his kinsmen and neighbors to him. For when Jesus handed that scroll back, when Jesus took a seat, Luke reports that all eyes were still upon him. There was that moment of collective silence where that question – Okay, so what next? – was hanging in the air. And Jesus, I've got to think he knew those people well. He anticipated what was on their minds. He knew from being part of the community what sorts of joys were lifting them and what burdens were dragging them down.

So notice, Luke says that he began teaching. No, not the shortest sermon in the history of the world. He began his teaching by saying that this scripture has been fulfilled, not just in his speaking, but in their hearing of it. Yes, fulfilled in his presence, but also in their embrace, reaction to and claiming of what that presence means. Today, Jesus says, today – which means right now – all of this is embodied in me.

And then Jesus, in his silence, put the ball back in their court to see how they might collectively respond to that same implicit question. Okay, friends, now what? Luke is clear that the initial reaction of the people is how people always reacted when they came face to face with Jesus. They were amazed! This particular Greek word of amazement that Luke uses here is one of a positive marveling. We marvel at those things that are bigger than us. We marvel at those things that draw us outwards. We marvel at those things that defy something that we might be able to do. I love the New Revised Standard Version translation, which says they don't marvel at the power of his words. It's not his charisma. It isn't strength. Instead, it's the gracious way that he

spoke. The way that he invited them in. The way they connected those words on paper -- that scroll -- to the God to whom Jesus had just testified.

When given the chance, Jesus reminded them, in all of their burden and joy, of why God is such a blessing, and saying that right now, right here, that blessing is available. Turn outward and you will see it. No wonder they were amazed, no wonder they were open. Now, would it be enough to make them see everything new?

Matt Fitzgerald is a wonderful pastor of a United Church of Christ congregation, St. Paul's in Chicago. It is one of those big, alive places full of much. I love his reminder and his take on this passage, and I spent a good deal of time thinking about it this week. Fitzgerald reminds us that we often fall prey to making the gospels a big old amalgam, taking Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and folding them all in. I know we all love the TV show "Glee" and how they take songs and do mash-ups, right?

Well, Fitzgerald says we ought to be a little bit more cautious with the Bible, and maybe listen to what Luke is trying to say. Because you see here in this reaction of the people, it's a different reaction than we get in Matthew and Mark. If the questions when we come to worship are Who is Jesus and Why does he matter, in Matthew and Mark they never get to the second question because they're hung up on who Jesus is: Wait, isn't that just the carpenter's kid? How could that guy possibly be the Messiah? That's crazy talk!

But in Luke, that isn't the issue that's on their minds. They are well aware of who Jesus is. Isn't this Joseph's son? Remember, if we go back to the 87 verses that shape the lead-up to Christmas, we hear how Jesus is part of the covenant. We hear how he is an unfolding of all the covenants of the Old Testament. Being Joseph's kid means that Joseph is one of David's offspring, which means that Jesus could very well be the One who is in the line of the throne of David. If he's of David's line, that connects him to Abraham, and the idea of God's unfolding blessing. All these covenants. And can't you imagine that being excited by Jesus saying "It is here, it is now, right now, get ready," the people in Luke don't have an issue with *who* Jesus is. They have an issue with what it means.

They don't want less Jesus, they want more Jesus. They want Jesus to take all of that goodness and suddenly solve all their problems. They want Jesus to handle all of their issues and their burdens, their needs and concerns. And who wouldn't? We all have those needs. And that is one piece of who Luke portrays Jesus to be, someone who will wipe our tears, someone who will sit with us amidst the pain, someone who is in the midst of it all the way in our lives. But in this opening passage, for Luke, unlike the other gospels, rather than miracles and other things, there is this profound teaching of Jesus which invites the people to look outwards. To say that this reading from Isaiah is for us and also for everyone. And the way we're going to get there is by focusing on the covenant of God which is revealed for all people, and watch it come to life in me.

I imagine the people felt, oh, aren't we lucky. The Messiah is from our hometown. Everything here is going to be fixed. Everything is going to be right. But Jesus said that's not how this works. Instead, it's about opening ourselves to each other, turning out in that amazement to

seeing things in new ways. To remember that, as we get later in The Good Samaritan in Luke, we *are* our brother's keeper. Luke is always about pushing the boundaries as to how we see this enfleshed Jesus coming to life. And reminding us that when flesh comes into contact with the Spirit, not only are minds opened, but something tangible happens.

And so amazement and openness turns to anger and frustration. It turns to leading Jesus out, it turns to leading him to the edge of the cliff. It turns to wanting to throw him off that cliff and be done with him. If you aren't going to solve the problems the way I want you to solve them, then go. But that isn't the God we know. That isn't the God that Isaiah proclaims, now is it? The question is not do we let Jesus in to solve our problems, but instead do we let him in to open our hearts of how we see things.

Ruth Duck wonders about the end of this story and that whole slipping through. She wonders about that pregnant moment there on the edge of the cliff when this brand new beginning of Luke may become a very quick dead end. She wonders if there might have been some residue from that amazement in worship. Whether when flesh comes together with Spirit, that something tangible was left behind for enough of the people in the crowd that they said This can't be an ending. She wonders if maybe it was those people who were inspired who crafted a way for Jesus to slip through that crowd and continue. She wonders if faith, just like in the synagogue, becomes a back and forth, God's words spoken in love but requiring our human hearing and response. She wonders if this is both the beginning of a new day in God's ongoing creation, and also an invitation for a new response from us, too. No matter how we responded yesterday, no matter when we might have been willing to give this all up. Luke's account makes room for the fullness of the human condition in all its amazement and all the ways we fall short, too.

And yet, Luke is here to tell us that no matter how we try to capture and lock down Jesus for our own purposes, he's going to slip through our fingers, and keep going on spreading good news. And our job is to listen and follow.

This is room is so amazing. Our conviction is that when we worship, we come face to face with Jesus sitting in this room too, and with his Spirit. We understand that it's an ongoing invitation to openness. We pray and we lament and we share the sorrows of our lives, and we also open ourselves up to things beyond ourselves, to let the bigness of God surpass not only the limitations of what we know, but even the best of what we might imagine.

So it got me wondering, and I think I have an answer to why this room feels the way it does. It's because this room, for nearly 200 years, has been the place where we come to experience the fullness of life. Where we become to celebrate babies. Where we come to marry couples. Where we come to remember and mourn those who have died. From Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday, from Christmas to Easter, from those moments we come in dancing to those days we can barely stagger through the door. For when we engage the mysteries of life and death, and when we allow Jesus to be present in this room, and when we allow Spirit and flesh to interact, I believe that something tangible, a residue, is left behind. I think that residue is sitting in those pews. I think it's floating up near the ceiling. I think it attaches to the floor, and lingers in those beautiful windows. I think the truth opens us up back to possibility and to wholeness, even and especially if it is not in ways we expected, imagined or thought we needed. Luke was always inspired by

the One – Jesus -- and by his Spirit that often did things in ways that didn't make sense. And yet looking back on it, made perfect sense and changed everything.

Friends, may we always come into this room and feel the Spirit that lingers in the air. May we always come face to face with Jesus. And not just go Wow for the moment. But may we be amazed enough to let it be a new beginning for us, for each other, for the world, and for our faith. God grant that yet more light and truth might spring forth from God's Word.

Amen.

SENDING CHARGE (written by Connie Epp)

As you go forth from this place,
remember that the Spirit of God is upon you,
and has anointed you.

You are the salt of the earth.

And you bring light to the world.

You are not too young or too old,

You are not too rich or too needy

to bring good news to the impoverished,

to give a hand to the brokenhearted.

And to live out freedom and pardon

through the gifts you have been given.

So remember to pack

Peace in your toolbox,

Hope in your briefcase,

Love in your lunchbox.

And may integrity, honesty and joy

be your designer wear of choice.