



COMMUNITY  
PRESBYTERIAN  
CHURCH

MINISTER  
DAN YEAZEL, PREACHING  
KIM JOHNSON

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*Third Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
*January 21, 2007*

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*Luke 4:14-21*

### *Eyes Fixed*

Intro: Our NT reading is from Luke. Jesus of Nazareth is in Nazareth taking his turn leading worship. Let listen for God's word as we read of Jesus reading God's word.

Each week we read scripture - that is an essential part of worship. As scripture is read I know some people follow along in their Bibles. Some people close their eyes to listen. Some people confess that they begin to tune out because they know the sermon is coming and they let their minds wander. Others ask themselves: "I wonder what kind of sermon he's is going to get out of that text?"

Presbyterian hold scripture in high regard, but we don't stand as scripture is read like the Lutherans often do, or cross ourselves as the Catholics may do. The reading of the scripture should be a high point in any service of worship. I once had a preaching professor say there are some texts that are so great you should preach first and then read the scripture, do your best to get people ready to hear the good news and then get out of the way of the word. The text can be so profound.

This is a momentous day when Jesus came back to his hometown and went to the synagogue to worship. It was his first time home after his baptism by John and after his temptation in the wilderness. The word had started getting out about what he was up to. He had begun teaching in the synagogues of neighboring towns, and people were excited by what they heard. He was making a name for himself. Now he was back in the synagogue he had always attended as a boy and as a young man.

Synagogue worship in the time of Jesus was a somewhat informal affair. The service consisted of prayers, reading of scripture, comments by one or more adult males of the congregation, and a collection for the poor. There were no official "ministers"; an invitation to read and speak could be extended by the elders to anyone they chose. It was customary for the reader to stand

when he read the scripture and to sit when he gave his commentary or sermon.

Luke's Gospel tells us that when Jesus stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where these words are written:

*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.* (Lk 4:18-19)

I don't know what the people in the synagogue were doing when Jesus read those words. Maybe some of them quickly tuned out. Their eyes glazed over and their minds wandered; they had heard these words from Isaiah many times before. Maybe some of the listeners tried to pay attention, but got bored or lost along the way. Maybe some of them wondered what Jesus was going to say about them during his sermon. This text is a beloved for Israel, someday there would be relief. People knew this one like Martin Luther King's I have a Dream speech. They knew how this text went.

But regardless of how the congregation listened to the scripture, it was what happened next that got everyone's attention. Jesus stopped before completing the whole passage, he stops mid-sentence and then he rolled up the scroll and sat down. Then, as Luke tells it, "the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." It was that

hush, that pregnant pause, that silent shiver of excitement, which comes when the orchestra conductor raises the baton, when the batter stands waiting for the first pitch of the big game, when the renowned speaker snaps on the light at the lectern. You can almost sense the people leaning forward in expectancy.

Jesus looked out at the waiting congregation, no doubt waited a beat or two, and then said what none of them could ever have guessed he would say: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It is argued that Jesus never set out to be the founder of an institution, much less the founder of a religion. Anyone who claims to know exactly what Jesus intended is a bit too bold I feel. As I read the evidence in the gospels, it seems clear to me that Jesus understood himself as called by the Spirit of God to initiate what he himself called the kingdom of God, the reign of God.

That's what he meant when he announced to the people in the synagogue at Nazareth that the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled "today." It is coming to pass now, said Jesus. As the Gospel writer Mark records it, the essence of Jesus' preaching was contained in short statement. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15).

The mission that Jesus set out upon was an active, dynamic, disturbing mission defined by Isaiah: to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. Jesus did not say: what I

want to do is establish an institution that will elect committees, build buildings to worship in, hold conferences, and have meetings where people squabble about the budget. Instead he outlined his understanding of a holy movement of justice and freedom, called the kingdom of God.

One theologian offers this description the church. The church, he says, is that part of the world that, in the strength of the Spirit, has accepted God's kingdom made explicit in the person of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of the church, in service to the world, is to preserve the constant memory of the kingdom, to celebrate the kingdom's presence in the world, and to shape the way the kingdom is proclaimed.

In this definition, the emphasis is on action, not on organization. The church is a movement rather than an institution. By this definition, when the church gathers for worship and for fellowship, the aim is not to make its members feel good but to equip them for putting into visible form the kingdom of God in their daily lives.

The church does not exist for itself. Whenever we in the church get so caught up in maintaining, preserving, or expanding the church for its own sake, we betray the Christ whom we say we love and serve. This is especially dangerous because many people, even church people, think of religion and the church as a leisure time activity. Religion and church are something you do in your spare time, your personal, private time. Most church activities, for example, take place on the weekend, which for most Americans is leisure time.

In some ways the early Christians had an advantage over us. They met for worship on a work day, on the first day of the week, at sunrise, before they headed off to their jobs. It was on the first day of the week that their Lord had risen from the tomb, not on a holy day, but on an ordinary day of earning daily bread. The first Christians understood that faith must inform every part of life, not just what they said and did when they enjoyed worship and fellowship with other Christian believers.

In the same way, you and I must understand God's kingdom is not limited to our private lives. And we must understand as well that true religion goes beyond the walls of this building. God is at work in the church, yes; but God is also at work in the world. When Jesus declared his mission in that synagogue at Nazareth, he was addressing all the ills that plague humanity. When we pledge our lives to him and his way, we commit ourselves to confronting the great issues of our time: poverty, disease, war, political freedom, racial and ethnic hatreds, the survival of the planet.

At its best, the church helps us recognize that all of life is holy, not just what happens when we gather to sing hymns, to pray, to hear the scriptures read. In fact, worship should prepare us to carry out faith out into the marketplace, the world of work and commerce and education and family life.

What comes at the close of worship? It's a blessing; we call it the benediction. In some ways it's the most important moment in worship, as the people are sent forth to the world with God's blessing granted to them.

Frequently, the benediction is phrased in terms of a charge, an order: "Go forth!" and then a blessing is given: "and share God's peace."

An old story is told about a man who came to a Quaker meeting and was puzzled because everyone was just sitting there in silence. After waiting patiently for a long time for something to happen, he finally whispered to the person sitting next to him: "When does the service begin?" The answer came back: "When we leave." There is a truth we know, when our worship ends, our service begins. Our service begins when we leave these walls and take with us the reality of God's Kingdom as Jesus taught it and lived it. We go, and the Spirit goes with us. Amen.