

## “Good News?”

by Ellen Williams Hensle | January 26, 2025

It's all been going pretty well up to this point. Jesus has been preaching in synagogues throughout the region of Galilee, and he has been well received – praised, even. Word starts going around about this son of a carpenter from Nazareth, who suddenly seems to be filled with the Holy Spirit and bringing a Word from the Lord everywhere he goes. Luke is vague on the details of this early ministry, but he does make it clear that Jesus is getting some buzz.

Then Jesus goes to Nazareth, the town where he grew up. Returning to his home synagogue, he stands up to read Scripture and provide commentary on it. We can imagine Jesus surrounded by people he's known since he was a kid. He may have even spoken there before – synagogue gatherings were a lot less formal in those days. All adult men were invited to read Scripture and share their thoughts on it during worship. So perhaps this is not the first time Jesus has read from the Torah scrolls in the Nazareth meeting house.

But this seems to be the first time Jesus makes a claim to be God's chosen one. When he opens the scroll to read, he chooses a quotation from late in the book of Isaiah, a passage about the promised liberation of God's people, to be carried about by God's chosen servant, the anointed Messiah. According to Isaiah, the anointed one will bring good news to the poor, release to those in captivity, healing to the infirm, freedom to the oppressed, and announce a new season marked by the Lord's favor. Isaiah's original audience was longing for freedom from Persian rule; Jesus and his fellow Gallileans were longing for freedom from Roman imperial rule. Isaiah announces that the anointed one will bring an end to all oppression.

Jesus begins his commentary on Isaiah by saying, “today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Jesus is making an identity claim: I am God's anointed one, the Messiah, the one who is bringing good news to the poor and freedom to the oppressed. That's a bold statement from a hometown boy. While our translation of Luke's original Greek says that “all spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words,” we can hear some ambiguity here – [amazed] “is this not Joseph's son?” could easily be [skeptical] “is this not Joseph's son?” In other words, who does this upstart think he is? Or, if you're the Messiah, why don't you prove it?

Apparently, Jesus has proved his abilities elsewhere, namely at Capernaum, about 20 miles away from Nazareth. Though the gospel of Luke has yet to tell us about it, apparently Jesus has already been there, and word about his miraculous activity there has made it back to Nazareth. The people in Nazareth are expecting Jesus to do the same for them. Judging by the strength of Jesus's reaction, they may be upset that he has yet to do the same for them.

Scholars believe that Capernaum was home to a significant population of non-Jews. So reading between the lines of this story, we can hear Jesus's neighbors saying, wait a minute. The Messiah is supposed to come for us, to set *us* free from oppression. What are you doing over there in that town full of not us? Healing, casting out demons, doing deeds of power – wasn't all that good stuff supposed to be for us?

In response, Jesus recalls two stories about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, both recorded in the books of Kings, which record God's history with the people when Israel was ruled by monarchs. In the first story, God sends a years-long famine over the land to punish the people for worshiping the god Baal. To provide for Elijah during this time, God sends him to a widow in the Phoenician town of Zarephath. Not to an Israelite family in an Israelite town, but to a non-Israelite family in a non-Israelite town; a Baal-worshiping town, even. Throughout the famine, God miraculously provides enough meal and oil to make bread not only for Elijah, but also for the widow and her son. God's mercy, grace and providence extend to this outsider and her family.

In the second story Jesus recalls, another non-Israelite, this time a Syrian named Naaman, hears about the God-given power of the prophet Elisha. Naaman is afflicted with a skin disease and longs to be healed. So he travels from his country to the home of Elisha seeking a cure. Elisha tells him to wash in the nearby Jordan River. Naaman's first reaction is disgust – the Jordan is so dirty! If all I had to do was get wet, I could have done that in a cleaner river at home! But Naaman's servants convince him that since he's come all this way, he might as well give it a try. He does, and he is healed of his disease. His response is to praise Elisha's God as the one true God.

Taken together, these examples remind those gathered in the Nazareth synagogue of what they should already know – that God's blessing has always been intended for God's own people, yes, but also for every person of every nation. And this is what Jesus will be about as well. He will indeed proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captives and freedom for

the oppressed – but not only for the poor and captive and oppressed of his own people. Jesus comes for the poor and captive and oppressed of every people. He desires healing and freedom and release and wholeness for the whole human family. And he wants his followers to care for the whole human family as well.

This is too much for the people in the Nazareth synagogue. They run Jesus straight out of the synagogue and straight out of town. In fact they intend to stone him by throwing him off a cliff. Why do we so often hear good news for other people as bad news for us? As famed preacher Fred Craddock says in his commentary on the crowd's reaction, quote "anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long defended and embraced. Learning what we already know is often painfully difficult. All of us know what it is to be at war with ourselves, sometimes making casualties of those who are guilty of nothing but speaking the truth in love."\*

Of course Jesus, being Jesus, is able to escape this attempt on his life unscathed. But we now know something important about him. He is God's anointed servant, the Messiah. His ministry will bless the poor, the imprisoned, the afflicted and the oppressed, of every race and people. And we now know something about how people will respond to him: some with belief and gratitude, and others with skepticism, disbelief, anger, even violence.

The truth of the matter is that Jesus was not always a popular guy. We believe his message is Good News, but it was not always received that way. Speaking the truth in love does not always garner the speaker admiration and support.

We saw that this week when Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde addressed the president, vice president and other leaders in a sermon at the National Cathedral. In her sermon, Bishop Budde reminded us of the principles of equality and dignity that come from our religious ideals and are enshrined in our constitution. And she asked the president to have mercy on those who are afraid for their lives right now, especially for lesbian, gay and transgender Americans, and for immigrants who fear that their families will be torn apart by deportation orders. In response to her plea for Christ-like compassion, Bishop Budde was publicly excoriated, mocked for her gender and sexuality, accused of being a demon, threatened with bodily harm and ordered to apologize. She experienced what it is like to speak the truth in love and be greeted not with acceptance but with violence.

I realize that my commendation of Bishop Budde's words will delight some of you and distress others. As a congregation we do not all agree politically, and I want to make it clear that I think that is a good thing. There are vanishingly few places in our society where we can come together across our divides to worship together, support one another through life's celebrations and struggles, and work out how to faithfully respond to the issues of our day. This community, in all its variety, is a gift from God. The presence of each one of you here is a gift from God.

And, if I'm doing my job right, there will be things I say that challenge us. Jesus's earthly ministry was never partisan, but it was inherently political, in that it involved the day-to-day lives of real people, who lived in a real world with real challenges. And so too do we live in a real world with real challenges. God calls us to lovingly respond to those challenges, always keeping in mind Jesus's message that God's blessing is for all people, especially those who are poor, sick, disenfranchised, undervalued, or crushed by the weight of oppression. That message got Jesus in trouble with the powers that be. And living out that mandate may also get us into trouble with powers that be. But I as a preacher and we as a congregation are not called to be popular; we are called to be faithful.

Now, I promise never to use this pulpit as my personal political platform. I will strive to speak the truth in love in a way that is actually loving. And I always want to hear your ideas, suggestions and feedback. I want you to challenge me, or whoever is leading you, when you believe I am wrong – as I am sure I have been and will be with regularity. After all, the word we use for what we do in worship, liturgy, means "the work of the people." What happens here in worship and every time we gather as a congregation is the work of all of us, God's people seeking to be faithful together in this place.

This has been an anxious week for many of us. I don't know what lies ahead, or what we may be called on to do together. But I do know that the Spirit of God is still at work in the world, bringing grace and hope and good news to the people who most need to experience it. And I do know that we are called to be about that work together as a community of faith. I pray that God will grant us strength to speak the truth and act in love, whether or not it makes us popular.

\*Craddock, Fred. *Luke*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary For Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990.