

I love the holidays, but there is this sense that the holidays bring back to the surface all sorts of emotions. It reminds us of the past year. It brings up emotions of the pain from the year or pain from your past. I think this is part of why our culture loves the holidays so much. We are so focused on the next. Christmas starts near New Year's Day, then Valentine's Day, then Easter, Memorial Day, 4th of July, Halloween, that hits Thanksgiving, then Christmas again. But what pervades this time of year is this sort of anticipation. There appears around every corner a new holiday, a new present, and a new whatever. It is the perpetual anticipation of what is next. It is built into our DNA.

I love the anticipation that is built into this season because what we do in Advent and the holidays is we foster a sense of longing and urgency. There is a sense of anticipation in the air, a sense of progression, that life is going somewhere, that things are moving toward something new, something exciting. In this season, we rehearse the story of Christmas by intentionally building a sense of anticipation for what is to come. And in this series, we have been exploring this sense of anticipation. Specifically, by looking at the words of Isaiah, and going back 700 years prior to the arrival of Jesus, God incarnate, we see this sense of anticipation growing.

The anticipation we sense in the holidays is rehearsing the type of longing we saw through the people of God for centuries. It is the same longing that Israel felt as they waited for the arrival of the Messiah. We celebrate Advent as an opportunity to rehearse the Christmas story again to understand what the coming of Jesus meant for 1st Century Jews. And each of us has felt this sense of anticipation before, whether a wedding, birth of a child, purchase of a home, graduation, etc. It is this sense of anticipation that we tap into this time of year

In some sense, in the story of the scriptures from start to finish there is built into it a sense of anticipation. Only four chapters are excluded from this. Genesis one and two where the tension is created, and Revelation 21 and 22, where the tension is resolved. Outside of those four chapters, the narrative of the scriptures is about anticipating God's movement in renewal and reconciliation. And this is what makes the birth of Jesus so profound, Jesus is the answer to that anticipation. The prophet Isaiah is continually speaking of this tension, and of the coming Jesus who would resolve this tension.

A New People and A New Kingdom

It is hard for us to understand the depth of the longing that was in Israel for a Savior. They were longing for the beginning of the new world. They were longing for a new start for the Kingdom of God to burst onto the scene. And so in Genesis one and two, you see the creation perfected, you see God's Shalom on the earth, everything flourishing and in its

proper order. But sin enters, humanity loses its way, and over and over, we see creation suffering from its intention.

It is in Genesis that we see God promising someone would come who would establish reconciliation of all things, who will bring about a new kingdom and a new people. This is the hope and anticipation that the people of God were waiting and longing for throughout the world. Over and over, we see God's people oppressed and pushed down by world powers. This is the story of Exodus; this is the story of Babylon and Assyria, over and over the people of God find themselves under oppression.

By the time Jesus bursts onto the scene in the New Testament, this is also the case. The people of God find themselves under the rule of the Roman Empire, who dominated with an iron fist, demanding worship of Caesar. The Romans were known for the incredible military force and crushed any opposition to the Roman way. They were brutal, oppressive, and vigilant in their oppression. We find the people of God under this kind of weight. All the while, they were holding to the promise of a coming Messiah, someone who was going to come and establish the Kingdom of God. It is into this story that Christmas bursts in, the promise of a new kingdom, a new people, and a new creation in the form of a baby! Or as Eugene Peterson puts it, "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood."

We start by looking at Luke 4:16-30. We'll look at the end of the story first because this will help in how we frame the entire story. And what we will see is the arrival of a new beginning, of the new kingdom of God, in such a way that it infuriates the insiders

"All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They 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. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way." Luke 4:28-30

Here we see the ending scene of Jesus' first recorded sermon in the Synagogue of Nazareth, his hometown. Jesus returns to his hometown, and something was said, which caused those listening to drive him out of the synagogue and seek to throw him off a cliff.

Jesus had a tendency of saying and preaching things that put him in these situations. Large crowds gathered, and the message he delivered tends to drive people. Now, let's explore what drove the people to these ends. Because remember, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, he was speaking to a Jewish audience. It is his people that he is speaking to. And, so with that in mind, we look at what Jesus said that drove the people to desire to throw him off the cliff.

“He 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written.” vv. 16-17

As mentioned before, Luke placed this story at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It is this moment that launched his public ministry career. This was an important moment in Jesus' ministry.

In verse 16, we catch a vision of Jesus' regular life-rhythm. This was passed down from Jesus' parents to him. And as Jesus' ministry unfolds, we see a series of controversial encounters take place on Sabbath days. And each of these involves a conflict with the religious establishment, and Jesus challenging their hollow piety.

Verse 17 states, *“...and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.”* Now, for us to appreciate the account of events, it is helpful to understand a bit of what a traditional synagogue service would look like. To have an official synagogue service, there were requirements.

The Shema would be recited. *“Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one...” (Deut. 6.4-9)*, which would be followed by prayers. Then there would be two Scripture readings. One would be a Torah reading (Genesis - Deuteronomy), and the other would be a Prophetic reading. Out of reverence for the text, the people would stand during the reading of the text, and then the teacher would sit to teach, followed by the closing benediction.

What we see is Jesus joining the regular rhythm of the synagogue service. He speaks up at the place where a reading from the prophets would be expected. Jesus is handed the scroll of Isaiah, and either he selects it, or it is was the normal reading of the day, no one is certain, but he reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 with a sentence from Isaiah 58:6 thrown in as well. Now the text he reads from Isaiah is of the utmost importance in the story of Israel.

“...and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” Then 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.” vv. 17-20

A bit about the text in Isaiah. This text comes in the middle of a section of poetry in Isaiah, Chapters 60-62, which declared the coming reversal of the fortunes of Jerusalem. It was the coming abundance and prosperity of Jerusalem and the corresponding subservience of the nations.

It is these three chapters that describe the coming establishment of the Kingdom of God in the New Israel. They describe that it is from there the Good News to the poor will be declared, and the nation will be blessed so that it will be a blessing for all the world. These three chapters

all speak about the hope of a new coming. Here in Isaiah, the people of God are in exile; they've lost everything; they are in a dark moment of the soul, and Isaiah comes to preach this good news. He brings this good news, proclaiming that God will one day restore Israel. He is bringing new beginnings. It's as if Isaiah is saying, “God is still present, he is still moving, he is still here, working all things toward the reconciliation of all things.”

Now, what sets chapter 61 apart from the preceding chapter is the integral role of the human servant. It is this human agent/servant who will undertake and enact the intention of Yahweh. In the Isaiah text, it is this human agent who is speaking in first-person. What Jesus will go on to claim after the reading is that he is the agent represented in Isaiah 61.

Newness

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn...” Isaiah 61:1-2

Jesus took this text, read it in the first person. He is saying that the Spirit that is upon the person in Isaiah is now upon me. Both Jesus and the Isaiah text offers two authorizations as to establishing the credibility of this human agent: The Spirit of the Lord and the Lord's Anointing

Theologian Walter Brueggemann points out, “the juxtaposition of 'spirit' and 'anoint' is bound to recall in Israel the old narrative of the authorization of David...” In the Davidic narrative, he too is authorized for ministry by the Spirit and anointing. For Israel, David is symbolic of newness, a radical newness in Israel. In the same way that David brought radical change, so to Jesus brought about a newness through the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth!

This was a Messianic prophecy, meaning those in attendance would have known this was speaking about the promised Messiah, and Jesus was claiming to be him. Jesus is declaring, “I am beginning something new in your midst! What does this newness look like?”

Isaiah 61:1b-2 and Luke 4:18-19

The text in Isaiah speaks of a very specific sort of liberation, and it is unavoidably social in form. What Jesus and the figure in Isaiah are speaking of is a drastic reordering of the social life. It is the reordering that we will continually see Jesus do throughout his ministry: First will be last, blessed are the poor, to live you must die, whatever you've done for the least of these, you've done to me. Jesus' ministry and the inauguration of this ministry placed the poor, both economically and spiritually, at the forefront of the ministry. Put bluntly, Jesus is declaring and establishing himself as the Messiah for the lowly.

One of the literary techniques used to bring emphasis in this text is the list of infinitive verbs in these first few verses. And the verbs used here about the poor speak about a dramatic ministry to the poor and oppressed.

To bring.

To proclaim.

To bind up.

To release.

To proclaim.

All of these actions are powerful ministries to the weak, the powerless, and the marginalized, to restore them to full function in a community of well-being and joy.

Now all of this social reordering and the radical proclamation of God's Kingdom establishing itself is framed by two key statements in what Jesus read. And each of these phrases is inherently social. Resist the urge to over-spiritualize this text.

To proclaim the good news to the poor.

This first verb used in Isaiah is the verbal form of the gospel. It is a word Isaiah uses often, and it is a dramatic announcement of Yahweh's newly gained power to reorganize the public life according to Kingdom principles. Here there are direct social implications. The word poor in Hebrew is the word Ani. This word encapsulates more than simply the economically poor, although it certainly means that too. The word also involves those of low social status, those with disabilities, women, and children. All would be considered to have been the recipients of this "good news." Also, it would include social outsiders, people of other ethnic groups, or those whose life choices have placed them outside of religious circles.

Here we see the pronouncement of what is manifest throughout Jesus' ministry, an emphasis on the marginalized, because in God's new ordering of humanity, "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first."

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Most certainly, this is believed to be about the Year of Jubilee. The entire text is bursting with Jubilee language. Now here is where it gets demonstrative. The Year of Jubilee is established in Leviticus 25. There were no historical accounts of Israel ever fulfilling the year of Jubilee, but nonetheless it was instituted and instructed by God. This Jubilee practice was designed to maintain economic equality throughout Israel. It was in the Jubilee year that all properties lost in economic transactions were restored, debts were canceled, slaves were freed, and economic restoration was restored.

What happens in this Jubilee language is Jesus declaring that a new time, a new era had arrived and to the poor, destitute, brokenhearted, outcasts, and the marginalized there was Good News! Restoration was coming! For the economically down-trodden, good news was here! God is with you! For the spiritually bankrupt and morally decayed, good news is here; God is with you! Rehabilitation of life out of impoverishment, powerlessness, and despair. Jubilee was happening, and it was happening now. The Jubilee was representative of a fresh start every 50 years!

Jesus' Selective Quoting

Now, remember, what Jesus is going to say will drive the people listening to want to throw him over a cliff. But here is the problem, people

don't get murdered for declaring good news to the poor. People don't get killed for saying to love others. We can all get behind that one. So what does Jesus say that infuriates the crowd?

It is less what he said and more what he didn't say. What Jesus does here is fascinating, and if we are not careful, we'll miss it. Jesus stops his quote of Isaiah 61 in the middle of the sentence. In bold in the Isaiah text are the parts Jesus omits.

Isaiah's Text – 61:1-2

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me **to bind up the brokenhearted**, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor **and the day of vengeance of our God**, to comfort all who mourn.

Jesus' Text - Luke 4:18-19

"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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

The text in Isaiah reads, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God..." Now, in the synagogue, at this time, there would have been people in the audience who had the Old Testament memorized. And they would have known this messianic text, as it was a central text for the faith. They would have expected Jesus to finish the quote, but he stops.

What Jesus is doing is reorienting their understanding of the new beginning. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, we see the people of God continually crying out for the restoration of Israel and the destruction of Israel's enemies. They longed to see not merely Israel restored, but the enemy destroyed. However, Jesus stops the reading short, and certainly, those present would have had the text memorized and waiting for him to finish. Jesus leaves the part of God's enemies being destroyed out, and he does so very much intentionally! He will ultimately explain later in sharing two particular stories.

Jesus then rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant, and he sits down. This would have been a common practice; when one reads scripture in the synagogue, it was custom to stand, and when one taught in the synagogue, it was custom to sit. So Jesus reads this text, and as he sits, the people are anticipating his sermon, his interpretation of the text.

"He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'" (21). Jesus aligns himself with the human servant that God promised in Isaiah that would establish the new kingdom and new social order. Jesus is declaring that what he has come to bring is a new order, a new creation that has begun now and will be established in the age to come!

"All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. 'Isn't this Joseph's son?' They asked" (22). At this point, the response to the message was mere excitement and amazement. Here is Jesus, the local boy, who has returned to preach in his hometown. They

have heard of the good things he has done so far in his ministry, and are speaking well of him. Because those in the crowd are the poor, they are the recipients of the good news that Jesus has spoken about. But this is where the trouble comes.

“Jesus said to them, ‘Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your home town what we have heard that you did in Capernaum’” (23). Jesus understands the situation. They are probably proud of him or at least expecting him to do for them what he has done for people in other villages. He projects the proverb onto the people, assuming that they will receive special blessing because they are on the inside.

The Gospel that Jesus proclaims here is far more expansive than the people in the synagogue could have ever imagined, which is why he stops before the phrase “the day of vengeance.” Jesus saw their assumption of being with the ‘in’ crowd, thinking too highly of themselves. To symbolize the radical outwardness of the gospel, in declaring about the blessing of God on all nations, he cites two stories.

“Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. I 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. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And 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.” vv. 24-27

The first story - Elijah and the Widow of Zarephath - 1st Kings 17:8-24

The point of the story is that during a terrible famine, Elijah was not sent to relieve the needs of any of the many widows in Israel, as was to be expected, but rather to a Gentile woman living in Zarephath of Sidon, a Phoenician or Philistine city. The prophet of God, Elijah, was sent to the outsider, to the enemy, to the hated by Israel. Those in the crowd listening to Jesus wanted him to bring the Jubilee to them; they believed they were the only poor referenced in the Isaiah text. But Jesus radically redefines this by pointing that it is those on the outside, the marginalized, who will experience the Jubilee. It is the enemy!

The second story - Naaman - 2nd Kings 5

Naaman was a general in the armies of Aram (Syria), Israel's traditional enemy. Yet it was he whom Elisha healed and not one of the many lepers in Israel. The healing didn't go to Israel, but the enemy of Israel! This is the radical reordering of the gospel to the enemies. It is to those on the outside that Jesus orients the proclamation of the Good News!

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

What Jesus declares here about the gospel is that it is for the “other.” It is for the very ones that oppose everything about you. It is for the one who votes differently than you, who believes differently than you. It is for the one who you ignore and attempt to avoid. It is for the one that disgusts you. This gospel, this message of grace, it is good news for the poor, the brokenhearted, and the destitute.

The restoration of all things, enemies, and friends alike

And here is where and why we return to where we started.

“All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this. They 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. But he walked right through the crowd and went on his way.” vv. 28-30

It wasn't the message of hope for Israel that got the people furious; it wasn't his claim to be the Messiah, many had claimed that before. It was the radical nature and trajectory of who the gospel is for that infuriated them. It was the message of “good news” to the economically down-trodden, to the sick, to the outcasts, to the marginalized, to the enemies, to the ones opposed to Israel. This radical grace, this radical nature of the gospel, is what caused an explosion of anger and fury.

Finding Our Self in the Story

The way I see it, there are two places we can find ourselves in this story, two places we can respond to who is this Jesus.

First, we find ourselves as the poor. We are outcasts, rejects, marginalized, brokenhearted, and captives in need of liberation. And so we cry out, and we take solace in the fact that God hears our cries. He has come to proclaim good news to us!

Second, we find ourselves in the angry mob. Similar to the older son in the parable of the prodigal son, we are furious that God's grace extends beyond our walls. Rather than embracing Jesus' vision for Jubilee that stops before the “day of vengeance,” we eagerly anticipate and hope for a day where God destroys our enemies, but it seems Jesus has different plans. And this is the crowd where the story ends, and we are at the edge of the cliff, waiting to throw Jesus off.

This is the radical, far-reaching, expansive, upside-down nature of the gospel, the “good news to the poor.” This is the good news that will reorder our social standing. This is the good news that has come to the poor, the social outcasts, the brokenhearted, the marginalized, and the outlier. And to them, Jesus has brought good news. God is on our side; he is with you!

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