

How Jesus defined his ministry

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The Gospel according to Luke has its distinct features: the storybook birth narrative; the poetic songs of Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon; and the heart-warming parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. In this Sunday's lectionary reading ([Luke 4:14-21](#)), however, we get to the heart of the matter and hear what truly makes Luke distinct: a Jesus whose focus is salvation for those in need.

Only Luke gives us this encounter, in which Jesus chooses for himself a scripture passage that defines his ministry. In the evolution of the gospel, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each had their own hand in telling the story. Each presents for us a Jesus of his own understanding. Very rarely do we read a story in which Jesus defines himself. Sunday's Gospel lesson gives us exactly that.

Of all the passages in the Hebrew scriptures, Jesus finds Isaiah 61: "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." Notice that Jesus didn't choose the scroll. Isaiah was the scroll that he was handed, so the hand of God was a part of this, too.

But imagine for a second all the passages in Isaiah to which Jesus could have scrolled: the prophet's call, the judgment of Israel, the message of comfort, or the day of vengeance and recompense. Nope, out of all of them, Jesus chose to read about good news for the poor, sight given to the blind, release for the captives, freedom for the oppressed, and the proclamation of the year of the Lord's favor.

This is the moment when Luke's Jesus gets his real identity. All the rest of Luke's distinct theology pretty well revolves around this encounter. The Prodigal Son? The Good Samaritan? Mary's Song? Zechariah's Song? Simeon's Song? Although pulled from their own sources, they are tethered to Luke 4.

After reading the passage from Isaiah 61, Jesus sits down. In response to all of the eyes that are fixed on him, he declares, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in

your hearing." This is Jesus' way of letting the world know that his ministry is the fulfillment of this particular prophecy. This is his way of saying that everything else he will do and accomplish will be a reflection of this.

On Sunday, we have the chance to hear Jesus' words afresh and commit ourselves to the recognition that, indeed, that passage has been fulfilled in our hearing. There's a congregational response required of this passage. Those little words "in your hearing" are critical. Jesus could have left them out. He could have said, "I've done it all; you can rest easy," but he didn't. This scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. May our ears be open and our blindness removed until we see the work that Jesus is all about—in his day and in ours.

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