

Taking the good news home (Luke 4:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a)

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 3, 2001

Choose your words carefully if you preach to the people back home. Those who knew you will remember things that make many messages seem odd. Prophetic moralizing, for example, would sound hypocritical coming from most folks in such circumstances.

In my case, P. T. Reppert would likely be out there in the congregation. P. T. once got an ugly black eye from a baseball bat I'd flung in anger across a playground. That pretty well knocks out the Sermon on the Mount as a possible text.

I spent whole summers with a group of guys, chopping cockleburs and button weeds in the cornfields and talking the way teenage boys talk when they're off by themselves. Some of those "boys" would be in the congregation, so imagine the consequences should the day's lessons include Ephesians 5, which says, "Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting. Fornication and all impurity must not even be named among you."

Thankfully, our town has other churches, so Johnny Green's dad would not be at ours. He was Sergeant Green of the Nebraska State Highway Patrol. I had a conversation with him one evening soon after my 16th birthday. He pulled me over after clocking my speed at 110 m.p.h. He asked if my dad knew I had the car, commented on the foolishness of what I'd done, and began to write a ticket. I glumly estimated the consequences of this transgression—grounded for a month at least, maybe for the whole summer.

When Sergeant Green handed me the ticket, I saw that it was a warning. Unbelievable! My parents would never find out. That night I knew with absolute certainty that there was a God, a kind and gracious God who watched out for me in multiple ways. But I could hardly go back to that town and preach about how I'd come to such strong convictions.

I could never imagine going home to say, "Friends, I stand before you today as the fulfillment of God's ancient promises. Here's the program." Luke says, however, that

Jesus did exactly that. Christians consider Jesus the sinless son of God but affirm also his full humanity. So back home in Nazareth there must have been topics even Jesus would avoid. If nothing else, some folks there had changed his diapers, knew him when he had zits, and watched him cope, as must we all, with adolescence.

Jesus had been gone for a while. What had he learned? Had he seen things that would change their world? Perhaps he could explain his 40 days in the wilderness wrestling with three great dreams for fixing the world—prosperity, peace and immunity from premature death. Jesus determined he had an alternative mission. Could he explain it?

What is your program, Jesus? We sit in your congregation today. Tell us! Jesus stands to read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor . . . 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.” He ends in the middle of a verse without reading, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” Nor does Jesus read more of Isaiah’s oracle concerning comfort for mourners and cloaking the faint of spirit with praise, perhaps because further on Isaiah would repeat the claim that Israel shall have for itself the wealth of the nations, while all those others end up with nothing but God’s vengeance heaped upon them.

Such was—and is—the conventional messianic dream of oppressed people. When we take over, we will be on top. The creeps who have oppressed us will be on the first truck out.

Jesus wants no part of that. How, then, would he bring good news to the poor or freedom to the oppressed? He would do it, Luke shows, through persistent befriending of the poor, the outcasts, the little people of his day, including those who seemed his enemies. He listened to them and ate with them. Some he healed of maladies that diminished their lives. He simply kept on like that until he fell victim to the rich and the powerful.

Even then he responded not with vengeance, threats or self-interest. Rather, he went calmly toward death, stopping along the way to heal a slave’s ear, to comfort the women who wept for him, to ask forgiveness for his murderers and to encourage his fellow condemned. There we see Jesus’ messianic mission, the epiphany of God’s glory in action.

Jesus's program continues today. The anointed one still walks the road that leads from Nazareth toward the borderline between time and eternity, working among the poor, the oppressed, the mourners, the murderers and the murdered in the only body he has right now, the one Paul calls the body of Christ.

Do you want to see the messianic rule emerging with its release for captives and freedom for the oppressed? By the power of the Spirit that anoints you, join others who do likewise for poor, lonely, hopeless human beings. Then you too shall be messiah. Each of us can boldly return to our hometowns, and no matter what they know about us there, say as Jesus did, "The Spirit of God has anointed me. I come to bring good news, to free the oppressed, to give sight to the blind. God's ancient promises are fulfilled in your presence."