

Listen carefully to the words from Luke's gospel:

Luke 4: 16-21

Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read.¹⁷ The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet **Isaiah**. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,*

¹⁹ *and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

²⁰ He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him.²¹ He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

This is the scroll of Isaiah that Jesus was reading from when he stood up in the synagogue and read:

Isaiah 61: 1-11

The LORD God's spirit is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me.

He has sent me

to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners,

² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor

That is where Jesus **stopped** reading from the scroll of Isaiah. Jesus made the bold claim that **he** too was anointed. Isaiah was anointed to bring good news; but now Jesus says **he** has **fulfilled** the task God gave him to bring good news to the poor,

to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor

To be "anointed" means to be set apart, authorized and equipped for an important spiritual task. Isaiah was anointed and Jesus was 'anointed', 'set apart' by the Holy Spirit for his ministry of preaching, healing and deliverance.

Our reading from Isaiah goes on. Please read it when you get home today. Read it carefully. The one who is speaking in Isaiah shifts, so that it's first Isaiah, then God speaks at one point then Isaiah again. But what we've read already is more than enough for us to chew on today.

When we think about our faith, especially around Christmas with all of its sentimentality, and the powerful memories we have based in years of traditions, when we think about faith we tend to think about spirituality and tradition and comfort. But the spirituality of the Bible is not about taking us **out** of the world. It is about taking us deeper **into** the world. It is about strengthening us for the challenges of the world. God does not bless us to be self-satisfied. God blesses us so we can be a blessing.

In the same way, the story of Christmas does not distract us from the problems of the world. It confronts us with the problems of being human living in a world with problems. This is true throughout the Bible but becomes unavoidable in the story of a young couple who has more than their share of problems: unwed pregnancy, poverty, forced to migrate, later **after** Jesus' birth Herod's threat to kill Jesus, forces them to become refugees fleeing for their lives to Egypt.

This deep involvement with the world that our faith pushes us to is based in a fancy, theological word: "incarnation". Incarnation literally means "embodied in flesh." It is a central Christian belief that God's Word was **made flesh** in the person of Jesus Christ; that God's son was 'embodied in flesh' as Jesus. This is the central truth that demands we understand that our faith is not vague, spiritualized, or unrelated to the nitty gritty of the world. Jesus incarnated, embodied in flesh testifies to the truth that is restated **throughout** the Bible that God loves creation, the hard, material world of humans: flesh and blood; and God loves **all** of creation: animals and planets; stars and fish; rocks and mountains and forests. We see this love of God for creation in Genesis when God names it all "very good." And we see it in that God takes on human flesh and lives as one of us. That act of God makes human flesh and all creation sacred.

This is important for **so many** reasons, not the least of which is that in this season of Advent when we hear Jesus say "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it." We are to hear him clearly saying that those things are accomplished: In being incarnated, robed in human flesh those things have occurred:

The good news HAS BEEN preached; prisoners have heard the proclamation of their freedom; the blind have been given sight and the oppressed have been liberated. The year of the Lord's favor has been proclaimed. All of those things: freedom, sight, liberty; these are what Jesus called the **kingdom of God**. Jesus said: The kingdom of God has "come near" which is a way of saying: when you look around and see that the world is **still** a painful, broken place it does not mean that God is absent. It means that God has **come near**, God's kingdom is 'at hand', it's already **but not yet**. Brian McLaren says, "God's kingdom is fully present and available even when we fail or refuse to adjust our lives to it." God's kingdom is "simultaneously in reach and not yet seized, a gift already fully given, and not yet fully received, opened, and enjoyed. The gift has already been given and so is already present, but we have yet to awaken to it, receive it, open it, and enter it fully."

There is still work to do to make God's kingdom that is near, that is 'at hand' a **reality** among us. Jesus isn't the only one set apart. Isaiah was set apart and the Holy Spirit sets **us** apart for our ministry in Christ's name, as well. We don't preach, heal or deliver in **exactly** the same way as Jesus but just as a student follows a teacher, doing what a teacher does, we follow Jesus doing what Jesus does because we **are** anointed, set apart, called to do that.

Henri Nouwen said, "It is Advent again. 'Be alert, be alert, so that you will be able to recognize your Lord in your husband, your wife, your parents, your children, your friends, your teachers, but also in all that you read in the daily papers. The Lord is coming, always coming. Be alert to his coming. When you have ears to hear and eyes to see, you will recognize him at any moment in your life. Life is Advent; life is recognizing the coming of the Lord.'"

In **last** week's message I read a poem by Ann Weems that ends:

If Christmas is not now,
If Christ is not born into the everyday present,
then what is all the noise about?

The incarnation means that God made creation holy. It means that along with Jesus and Isaiah,
we too are set apart to do the work that Jesus did of bringing good news to the poor,
binding up the brokenhearted,
proclaiming release for captives,
and liberation for prisoners.

That is what all the noise is about!

We don't do it alone. It is already accomplished in Jesus life and death and resurrection. But, in every generation the work is given to make it reality among us following God's Spirit who empowers, enables and magnifies our efforts.

Madeleine L'Engle's poetry has been especially meaningful for me this Advent.

"First Coming" – by Madeleine L'Engle

*He did not wait till the world was ready,
till men and nations were at peace.*

*He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.*

He did not wait for the perfect time.

He came when the need was deep and great.

*He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.*

He did not wait till hearts were pure.

In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

*To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.*

*He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.*

*In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.*

*We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,*

for to share our grief, to touch our pain,

He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

from A Cry Like a Bell

We received some special mail for all of you. Ushers will you distribute those letters?

When you get your letter, open it and read it.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon YOU to bring good news! And now what! What will you do with that?

What good news will you bring to the poor?

How will you bind up the brokenhearted?

How will the captives be freed and prisoners liberated because of you?