

Vision, Healing, and Hope, plus Joy

Luke 1:46-55; Luke 4:14-30

If you could summarize who you are, how would you share the essence of yourself, your life, and your commitments? What would be the words that could sum you up? How much are you willing to reveal about yourself, to the world, to others, even to yourself?

I've had to do this a number of times in different ways for different reasons. Some were seminary assignments. I've done this every time I've had to update my official Mennonite Church pastoral resume. And every time I've been interviewed by a congregation.

Vision, mission, values & purpose statements are important for organizations including congregations. They try to get people focused on the future, unleash new energy, enthusiasm, loyalty, and at times, do damage control. They lay out the priorities and values. Who are we? What will we be doing? Why? How do we work together? When will it be accomplished?

Our denominational vision statement came out, in 1995 to help merge two denominations. The title is: *Vision: Healing and Hope*. Please compare it to North Star's vision statement, our Confession of Faith, the Convictions on the board as you exit the church, with Jesus' first recorded sermon. How do they match up?

Jesus gave the vision statement of all vision statements. His first official public act outlines his life, ministry, and purpose in a nutshell. He shared the essence of himself, his life, his commitments and purpose. So this passage has a critical function for the church. It reveals who Jesus is, what Jesus does, for whom Jesus has come, when it is happening and why.

Jesus' sermon sets out the main themes for Luke's Gospel. Luke tells this story as it occurs in real time. That is, the time it takes to read the story seems to be the total time of the actual event. Please listen as you picture the setting. **Read Luke 4:14-30.**

Why does Luke tell this story in detail? First, the words of Jesus are not just important for what they say but also because of their source. The origin of these words deserves attention. Jesus' situates his ministry in the ongoing commitment, love, and promise of God: to the lowliest of God's servants; to those who fear God in each generation; to the hungry; and to God's people Israel. The promise and prophecy of Isaiah in the Old Testament, provides the theological trajectory that Jesus articulates and embodies in the New Testament and for us today in Luke's Gospel.

Second, telling us about the event in real time means, it's important. Jesus' vision and values, mission and purpose are practically, succinctly articulated in this statement. The theological impulse of the message of Luke and Acts is important enough to share the details of this event. Jesus' words are a call to real life, real people, in real time. This is Creator God in our present and in our reality.

It's important to compare Jesus' words, his use of scripture, with his mother, Mary's Song. The language of Jesus' first sermon should sound familiar. Its tone, topics, and concerns share that in common with his mother, who first gave witness & words to her son's ministry. Mary's Magnificat foreshadows the ministry of her very own son. Mary's song acknowledges that what God has done, her son will do as well. She connects the dots, between the God that she knows, and has always known, and the God that is orienting her future, through her own son, Jesus. She realizes that God's favor of her, will be that which the world will come to know and experience because of her son, Jesus.

We have to believe Jesus learned something about Yahweh's vision, from his mother. Also, I don't think it's a stretch that the people in the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus' home town, would have heard about the strange happenings that occurred leading up to and after Jesus' birth, including Mary's song of praise. It's one reason we have so much detail about Jesus' birth. These events may have been common

knowledge to the villagers. Plus they had heard about Jesus as verse 15 tells us, “His teaching earned Him the respect and admiration of everyone who heard Him in Galilee.”

So when Jesus got up to preach the first sermon we have of his, he had people’s attention. He began by announcing a major theme of his birth. The Holy Spirit is at work. Jesus claims that he is accompanied by the Holy Spirit who fills, and empowers him for prophetic work. We know the Advent characters, experienced the Holy Spirit and proclaimed truth through the filling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit who led him into the wilderness for a time of fasting and testing. So when we hear that Jesus claims he is directed by the Holy Spirit, we should not be surprised to encounter empowerment, bold guidance, and prophetic words. That is what we and the people of Nazareth receive.

Also what’s important in understanding Jesus’ vision, is that the people Luke the author, was writing to, didn’t divide the world into sacred versus secular, religious versus political. For them all of life was integrated. It wasn’t I must act one way on the Sabbath and do as I please the rest of the week. So these “religious” words, using the prophet Isaiah’s prophecy had powerful religious and political meanings.

So when Jesus starts talking about good news, he describes a powerful change about to come. It’s a change the people hope will rescue them from Roman cruelty. Jesus tells them their hopes will be fulfilled – but not as they hope. The Jews had been waiting a long time for a savior to free them from Roman oppression. They liked the idea and language of liberation.

But as the people in Jesus’ hometown warm up to him, Jesus lets them know their expectations are not in line with God’s plans. He tells them not to expect the Creator to fit into their boxes. Instead he suggests the unthinkable; that God cares for the Gentiles; the same people who are oppressing them. That does not cause them to be happy. They liked his vision, then did not.

Jesus picks up the same message that the Old Testament prophets repeated time and again.

There is a book with the title; Good News is Bad News is Good News. Jesus’ sermon is certainly about the good news of liberation. But like a lot of good news, there’s often a little bad news lurking quietly underneath. For example, I’ve always wondered, it was great Jesus healed people. But then did they get jobs? Good news – they were healed. Bad news – they needed to become contributing members of society. Good news – they had a better life.

If someone says, “You’re forgiven,” it doesn’t make sense unless you needed something to be forgiven for. Good news – forgiveness. Bad news – I need to accept forgiveness. Good news – the past does not imprison me.

Is the coronavirus and 2020 a good news, bad news, good news message? Good news, it’s brought to our attention all kinds of things that are wrong in this world. The bad news is – we should not allow ourselves to be blind to racism corruption, economic disparities and so on. The good news is now we can work harder to right the wrongs, provide people a living wage, better medical care, honor essential workers, and face being part of systemic racism.

Jesus Nazareth sermon starts off well but then becomes complicated. Jesus shows up in his home town synagogue in good pious fashion. Jesus is a devoted local boy who turned out well, until he starts reading the great prophet, Isaiah. Isaiah moves quickly from the singular language, me and my God, to the social, plural good news of shared public life and justice: Jesus emphasizes that God sent him. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me.” The Holy Spirit calls the anointed one, Jesus, to focus on the plural reality: to preach good news to the poor, release to prisoners, sight for the blind, and relief for those who are oppressed, downtrodden. Then to top it off, Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor, this is the year of Jubilee.

The Jubilee year idea is an Old Testament law where a year is dedicated to rest, (even farm land), to restoration of original family property, and to freeing people from debts, servitude, and slavery. It was a year every 50 years when the Israelites would dedicate this year of rest to God, including not working, as an act that acknowledged God would provide for their needs. We are not sure if Israel ever did this. But it was a command by the Almighty to reset the economics and social power of the nation. And it especially declared the people's ultimate allegiance and trust was in their Creator God.

This sounds wonderful, until you think about the implications. The message of his language is plural. Good news for the poor may mean bad news for the non-poor. Setting free all the slaves means bad news, economic loss for those who own them. And now wages would be set by market forces. Business competition might increase. The jubilee year of the Lord's favor is great for those who need the redistribution of now alienated ancestral lands. But if you have amassed someone else's land - not so much. So we see the gospel at a whole new, corporate, social, economic and political level: good news is bad news is good news. Good news for some is bad news for others. Jesus declares quite a radical vision statement.

The people had all probably heard this kind of message before and we suspect ignored it. It was good theology and a message of hope, from the Old Testament prophets – as long as they & we don't have to actually implement it.

Jesus said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus outlined a vision, but it's not just a concept or an idea or a program. It is focused on a person. The first person singular pronoun is used three times in verse 18. Jesus is the change. Therefore, any definition of good news, release, sight, gospel, or change must be taken from his actions and his words and his personal character. CEO's and politicians and even church vision statements promise things, but Jesus really expects what he announces.

And the words are only the beginning. The rest of the story will tell us what real change is and means. It's centered on following Jesus.

How did the people respond? "At first, all spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. Isn't this Joseph's son?" the hometown people asked. They liked the message, just briefly.

With everyone's attention on him as he sat down, which was custom, and kept speaking, Jesus just had to turn a nice sounding, familiar message into cracking tradition wide open. He didn't give out more information, but declared, proclaimed an amnesty. His words of emancipation, changed the atmosphere of the room.

Jesus' announcement is a visionary upsetting practical word for back then and today. It's based not just in a policy or a law, but in his very person. In that Galilean synagogue, and today, a divine future is dawning – not just sometime, but - today. For Jesus to read this message from Isaiah & proclaim its fulfillment – is an indictment of all leaders, governments, social, cultural, & economic systems who claim to bring release and freedom. True freedom does not consist in money, possessions or in the ability to do as one pleases. It goes beyond our individual independence to big changes.

Jesus here sees salvation as understood primarily in social and not individualistic terms. To be more specific, salvation is a reversal of the social order. For example, in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, Jesus not only pronounces blessing on the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the hated; he also pronounces woes on the rich, the filled, the laughing, and the respected (Luke 6:20-26). Those on the bottom of society experience this salvation with rejoicing, while those on top experience it in the form of God's judgment and justice. Good news, bad news, good news.

Everyone has to be open enough to hear this news from Jesus' lips to their ears, hearts, minds and souls. And then put it into action.

This is precisely what makes good news, bad news, and yet good news. Jesus by Holy Spirit anointing, announcing the fulfillment of the OT prophet's dreams today, is always being accepted and rejected, celebrated and vilified in the books of Luke and Acts, and today.

This is all part of God's good news, bad news, good news vision of Jesus' good news. The person of Jesus is the exact place where Luke stakes his story of the Gospel. It is Jesus who reads this combination of Isaiah texts, closes the scroll, hands it to the attendant, sits down and says, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." What a powerful vision of how the world should be! What a life giving vision of what politics, economics & the social fabric of what the Kingdom of God should & can be.

So it should not surprise us that as the people understood the implications of what Jesus was announcing, their amazement turned into anger. And Jesus didn't help when he reminded them of some of their own history of Gentiles being treated kindly by Almighty God. And quoting the proverb, "no prophet is accepted in his hometown." didn't enhance the people's ability to hear, understand, accept & get excited about Jesus' vision. They tried to murder him. This is foreshadowing Jesus' crucifixion. Hallelujahs one day & then – crucify him, crucify him.

Today even before politicians and CEO's speeches are given, the analysis and criticisms pile on. But this did not cause Jesus to change his vision. Jesus had withstood the temptations by Satan in the wilderness. In Nazareth he was tempted to say the easy thing and do what ever it took to curry favor with his listeners. But we are grateful he stuck to God's vision.

And even today, many preachers & theologians try to down play this vision by saying it's a "spiritual" vision, not practical real expectation of the Kingdom of God. But it is always dangerous to not take Jesus & the Bible's messages as they are plainly spoken and written. Some times I think we can "protest too much."

The meanings of languages can be difficult to convey, especially translating languages into other languages. For instance, when I say, I ran to the grocery store, you all know I'm saying, I got into my vehicle to get there. Not that I literally ran to Lanigan. And you know I didn't go by public transport or bike - unless that's a regular habit. For some one learning English – this becomes confusing – unless they know the context. So I think it's dangerous to ignore or try to explain away the plain meanings of the Biblical texts – easily and often very forcefully, stridently and determinedly to fit our views.

It's not an accident that Jesus challenges the hometown crowd's view about who is on bottom of society and who is on top (verses 23-30). He reminds the crowd that even when there had been great need in Israel, God sent the prophet Elijah to the Gentile widow in Zarephath and the prophet Elisha to the Gentile leper, Naaman. By implication, the prophet Jesus is not sent to the synagogue in Nazareth but is sent from there to Gentiles. Luke is not being anti-Semitic or even anti-Jewish in presenting Jesus as making this announcement. In the late first century, he has a theological tradition that is matched by the Creator's world view of salvation for all people. And it's not just a spiritual one of faith but is practical.

Imagine how different the world would be today if Jesus' vision was being implemented. Imagine if our own life, purpose & vision were fully similar to Jesus'. Imagine how much joy, vision, healing, & hope would fill the world. Too often our vision is too small. With change we usually focus on ourselves, on what we might lose, instead of what the people of the world might gain with Jesus' radical changes.

After the people tried to kill him, Jesus went on his way and continued preaching and teaching and healing. And the reaction of his hometown, or people elsewhere, including religious and political authorities, did not keep him from broadcasting his vision statement of the upside down kingdom of God.