



**“Signs of Hope”**  
**Scripture – Luke 4:21-30**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, January 27, 2019**

Today we peer into Jesus’ hometown synagogue to overhear his first sermon to his family and neighbors. But, first, how did we arrive here?

Indulge me in a one minute geography lesson. Palestine was a long, narrow piece of land bordered on the west by the Mediterranean Sea, and on the east by the Jordan River. The Sea of Galilee is in the north and the Dead Sea is 80 miles due south. Jesus was baptized near the Dead Sea by John the Baptist in a spot known as Bethany beyond the Jordan. Some of us have put our feet into the muddy Jordan at this spot and contemplated our own baptism. Nazareth is up North, 15 miles west of the Sea of Galilee. The distance from where Jesus was baptized to his hometown of Nazareth is roughly 60 miles.

It appears that Jesus left the spot where he was baptized and tempted in the wilderness, and began the long journey back to Nazareth on foot – on unpaved paths, up and down hills, across the arid landscape. He stopped in synagogues along the way and began teaching. Word reached Nazareth, before Jesus arrived, that he was astonishing people with his teachings.

Once Jesus turned up, his neighbors already knew that their hometown boy was making quite a splash. When they realized he would be in their synagogue on the Sabbath, they packed it. Every seat was taken. People were lining the walls. Some even sat on the floor. Can you imagine the pressure Jesus was under to make a fine showing in front of his friends and neighbors? Can you see him glancing over at his family and yearning to please them?

When the moment arrived, Jesus stood up to read. He had arranged for the scroll of Isaiah to be given to him. Then, he unrolled the scroll. And he unrolled it and unrolled it until he reached the 61<sup>st</sup> chapter. He read: “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.”

After Jesus finished reading from Isaiah, he rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. Then, Luke says, Jesus sat down. To our ears, it sounds as if he is finished. He read the Scripture and sat down. The end! However, reading the Scripture and sitting down meant he was preparing to comment on the words he had just read. Sitting was the customary position for teaching. That is why the next verse says, “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” It is Luke’s way of saying, “Everyone leaned forward with anticipation to hear what he was about to say.” In the movie version, the background music signals a dramatic moment.

What does Jesus say? He says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” In other words, the words of Isaiah were not only for those who lived centuries earlier in the time of Isaiah. **Today** this scripture has been fulfilled. This is God’s word to you now. “The poor will be yanked from the bread lines and sit at banquet tables. Those who are captives of illness and injustice will dance in the town square. Those blinded by greed and fear will have their eyes opened to what brings true joy. Those who are oppressed will have the heavy foot pulled off their necks.” Luke says, “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”

If Luke had ended his retelling of this incident right there, we would picture Jesus standing at the door of the synagogue shaking hands with smiling neighbors who were telling him what a fine job he did. Luke could have wrapped up his vignette by stating that Jesus did his hometown proud.

Only that is not where Luke left it. This was no Norman Rockwell painting that captured an idyllic scene of neighbors gushing over the local boy who is poised to embark on a stellar future. Luke informs us that Jesus chose to push the boundaries of polite conversation. He illustrated his sermon with two stories that made it clear that when he spoke of bringing good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free, he was not merely saying that this is what God intends for *our* people. He gave two examples of foreigners to underscore that this is what God envisions for *all* people; even those they considered outsiders; even those they fear.

Jesus said, “There were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah...and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow in Sidon.” As if that were not enough to drive home his point, Jesus gave a second illustration that also stung. “There were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

That did it. Hometown boy or not, the people had heard enough. Luke writes, “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff!” Somehow, Jesus escaped their clutches and got out of Dodge.

It was quite an inauspicious beginning to his ministry. The people of Nazareth refused to hear that God’s grace embraces the foreigner. They wanted *their* enemies to be God’s enemies. Doesn’t God fence out the same people we fence out?

Jesus launched his ministry by announcing what he was about and he would challenge his followers to adopt his ways. Committing to Jesus is neither for the timid, nor for those unwilling to examine their prejudice.

The first verse of today’s passage included a phrase that is easily overlooked. It noted that Jesus was “filled with the power of the Spirit.” That means at least a couple of things. First, he was not wrestling with doubts; he was filled with conviction. He was not questioning whether he was on a God-guided path. He believed he was channeling God’s purpose for his life, so he was passionate and focused like a laser.

Filled with the power of God’s Spirit also meant he was fearless. When you know in your soul you are right, you are emboldened to speak the truth even when that truth is difficult for people to hear. Jesus knew that the message he felt compelled to deliver to the people of Nazareth would not be taken kindly. But because he was filled with God’s Spirit, he plunged into it anyway.

Jesus calls on us to do something that does not come naturally—to look beyond self-interest. He wants us to move beyond irrational fears, to move beyond self-justifications, and to move beyond blaming others for their plight. He wants us to discover the rich life that results when we care about the poor, the blind, the captive and the oppressed.

Given such a clear mandate, it is difficult for me to understand how a counter voice arose in the church. This is the voice that says that God will one day mop up the pain and suffering, so don't worry about it. Do not worry about present day unpleasanties, just try to be a nice person and believe the right things so that you can go to heaven. Do not concern yourself with the way African Americans are treated by some police officers or real estate agents or employers. Do not bother yourself with children who struggle in poverty. Do not fret about the lack of resources for people with mental illness. Do not agonize over people from other countries who are forced to flee for their lives.

“A recent survey from Public Religion Research discovered that the majority of churchgoers in the United States express high levels of nostalgia about the past and anxiety about the future. By strong majorities, religious Americans – particularly white Protestants, and without any significant difference between theological conservatives and liberals – believe that ‘our best days are behind us’ and that the future of society is bleak. In particular, mainline congregations are caught between glamorizing the good old days and a deepening sense of despair that a better future will never arrive...As a result, today is lost. Today is merely a stage upon which we mourn the loss of the past and (dread the future).”<sup>1</sup>

However, I see signs of hope. I see people of faith and you may be one of those. I have seen people of faith, and you may know some of them, who are focused on going to bat for people who are materially poor and spiritually poor. I have seen people of faith who are focused on helping people who are captive to sin and captive to injustice. I have seen people of faith who are focused on helping people who live under political oppression and those who live under psychic oppression. How can we transform a bleak picture of the future into a hopeful one? By allowing our hearts to soften toward suffering and by treating each person with dignity.

Coach Bob McKillop is the head coach of the men's basketball team at Davidson College, a small Presbyterian-related liberal arts college outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Basketball fans know Davidson thanks to its most famous alum, Steph Curry, who led the team to the elite eight when he was a sophomore in 2008. Coach McKillop said, “What keeps me so alive after 29 years of coaching Division I basketball is that my players are not just players. They are human beings and scholar-athletes at a college where all of the faculty and coaches nurture their development.”

Last July, Coach McKillop took his team on a trip. Not to the basketball Hall of Fame; not to Madison Garden or any sports arena. You know where he took them? To Auschwitz. Why? The coach said, “The volatility of our world right now requires a response informed by both a respect for human dignity and an understanding of what happens in its absence...(Referring to Auschwitz, he said): We are stepping into a moment in time when, for millions, evil seemed to have triumphed and humanity [had] vanished...I want them to understand this experience...not just as a lesson but to live what they learned. Our world needs leaders who aim to lead and to serve guided by humane instincts and creative and disciplined minds. We need advocates for, and defenders of, human dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

We live in a time when there is a growing number of leaders who engage in fear mongering to create a divisive and xenophobic atmosphere. Jesus encourages us to ratchet up our courage and soften our heart so that we will treat each leper, each parking lot attendant, each refugee, and each person behind the counter at Dunkin Donuts with respect and dignity.

#### NOTES

1. Diana Butler Bass, *Day1.org*, January 24, 2016.
2. Bob McKillop, “Why take our college basketball team to Auschwitz?” *The Washington Post*, July 3, 2018.