

Luke 4:14-21
Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
Sermon Series: Almighty Power
Jesus Has the Power to Set You Free

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
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¹⁴Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

**¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”**

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

We’re going to be trying something a little new and exciting this year during Lent. For half of the midweek services I will be leading worship and delivering the message, but on the other three weeks, we’ll have a guest preacher, Pastor Josh Olson from Shepherd of the Bay in Lusby. I hope that that is new and exciting for you. It’s always great to get a different teaching style and mix things up a bit. What if I were to tell you though that we were going to have a guest preacher today, and that it was none other than Jesus Himself. Now that would really be exciting! What kind of thoughts do you think would be going through your mind? If you got to pick, what would you ask Jesus to preach about?

I had a teacher in elementary school who answered some of the questions we had for her by saying “I’ll be waiting with you in the question line in heaven to find the answer to that one!” We all have questions we’d love to ask God. And a lot of them have to do with things we’ve read in the Bible. The Bible contains everything that we need to know for our salvation, but it doesn’t contain everything we want to know to satisfy our curiosity. Maybe if Jesus was here we would want Him to preach about the events of Bible History and fill in some of the gaps for us. What was the world like before the flood? How was Jonah able to survive inside the belly of that fish for three days? How many wise men actually were there? There are so many questions that we’re dying to know.

Speaking of dying though, we wouldn’t want all of His allotted 19 minutes to be spent talking about things that happened in the past. We would definitely hope to hear some more details on the future. Maybe we’d want to hear about how things will play out here on earth or, better yet, find out more about what heaven is going to be like.

In our text this morning, we heard about a congregation that actually got Jesus as their guest preacher. The events from our lesson take place somewhere around a year after Jesus' baptism and His temptation in the wilderness. It seems odd that Luke would skip almost a whole year of Jesus' teaching and preaching but that makes it all the clearer that this was a very significant event in Jesus' ministry. One of the elements that makes it so significant is that Jesus is preaching in a synagogue in His hometown. Luke fills us in that Jesus was becoming rather famous, news of His teachings were spreading throughout the land. Jesus' teachings were lively, authoritative, well-organized, practical, interesting, and true, all the things that you would hope for in a teacher and all of the things that pastors like myself hope to emulate in our teaching. In addition to His teaching, there were reports of all these miracles that He was performing. The people of Nazareth must have been dying to find out if all the news they were hearing about this man they thought they knew could really be true.

They got that opportunity when Jesus visited them at their synagogue. Before we go on, however, I'd like to draw your attention to verse sixteen from our text. **He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.** It might seem like Luke is just setting the scene for what follows, but those last four words, "as was His custom," really pack a punch.

Whenever we have doubts about whether we *need* to go to church on a particular Sunday, those four words should be enough to drive away whatever excuses or rationalizations we can come up with. Because what those words tell us is that even Jesus—who even with respect to His human nature was so far advanced in knowledge and wisdom, beyond any of us—still made attending the synagogues each Sabbath a part of His regular custom. How much more then, do we need to make a regular habit of worship?

Whether Jesus had been invited ahead of time to come and teach that day or whether the decision was made after He showed up isn't mentioned. At any rate, Luke shares with that Jesus was given that honor. He stood up and the clerk of the synagogue pulled the writings of Isaiah the prophet from the ark that contained the scrolls of Scripture. **Unrolling it, we're told, he found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

Then, as was the custom, Jesus sat down to deliver His exposition, His sermon. You can imagine the silence that fell over the crowd. Every eye in the synagogue was locked on Jesus as they waited to hear what this great teacher, this man whom many of them had grown up with, would say. As He opened His mouth to begin to speak, they must have been wondering, "Will He take us back to the glory days, Israel? Will He speak about the release of our ancestors from their captivity in Babylon? Or maybe it won't be about the past at all; maybe He's going to give us some bright promise of the future!"

Whatever they were expecting, it probably wasn't the message that they got. **Today, He began, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.** Jesus' message for them was not about the past, it was not about the future, it was about that very day. Jesus wanted the people to know that the man sitting in front of them was the fulfillment of this prophecy from Isaiah. He wanted them to know that **He Had the Power to Set Them Free.**

If Jesus were to come and speak as a guest preacher here at Shepherd of the Hills, I don't imagine that His sermon for *us* would be all that much different than His sermon that day in Nazareth. The words which He read from Isaiah highlighted two truths. The two key truths that

we see highlighted throughout all of God's Word. First of all, that passage from Isaiah reminded the people of who they were and the predicament they were in using words like poor, blind, and captive. But the second truth highlighted here is the promise of a Messiah. A Messiah who would come to make the poor rich, to give sight to the blind, and to free those in captivity. That promise was reaching its fulfillment at the very moment Jesus was reading those words.

Let's take a look at that first truth first. The word we have translated here as "poor" really carries a heavier sense than just someone who doesn't make much money. It refers to those who are completely destitute, unable even to provide for their basic needs. But the poor, whom Jesus had come to bring good news to, were not limited to those who were begging on the streets or trying to pay off debts from somewhere in a prison cell, the poverty and destitution that Jesus had come to relieve was a spiritual poverty. What He was reminding His fellow Nazarenes, and what He's also reminding all of us of, is that we are spiritually poor. Not just spiritually "not-so-well-off" or spiritually "could-be-doing-a-little-better" but rather, flat broke, bankrupt, without a penny to our name. Unable to provide for even our most basic need.

Spiritually speaking, we have absolutely nothing to bring to the table. But, the purpose of the Messiah was to bring good news to the poor. The good news that Jesus had come to proclaim was not that they had just won the landfall Powerball lottery or that they had unexpectedly come into an inheritance worth millions from some unknown relative. The good news that Jesus had come to proclaim was the Gospel. The good news was Jesus Himself.

Whichever way you look at it, whether we're plagued in spiritual poverty, blinded in the darkness of our sinful nature, or trapped in the captivity of sin, the picture is not a pleasant one. There are times when God's law lies so heavy upon us that we cannot help but feel the absolute truth of those words. And we *must* recognize that truth. We have to appreciate the full damning weight of our sins, a burden that we are powerless to relieve ourselves from. That is why God has given us the law. But Jesus' message for you today is not one of despair. It's one of good news. You have been rescued from the tomb of your sins. As destitute as you may be, you need never despair, because **He Has the Power to Set You Free.**

In the last line Jesus quotes from Isaiah, He identifies His mission as the Messiah to proclaim the year of the Lord's Favor. "The Year of the Lord's Favor," was an expression that had come to be synonymous with the Year of Jubilee which we heard about in our Old Testament Lesson (Leviticus 25). Among the many things that made the Year of Jubilee special, we saw in Leviticus that it was a year in which all outstanding debts were to be forgiven, and all bond-servants and slaves were to be set free. But the practice of observing that Year of Jubilee like so many of the practices that God established for His Old Testament people, served only as a shadow of the greater Year of Jubilee that was to come.

The message that Jesus was proclaiming in Nazareth was that *that* Year of Jubilee, the great Year of the Lord's favor, had come. You and I, brothers and sisters, are living in that Year of the Lord's favor. In a time when that message of the good news of the gospel of Christ is being preached throughout the world, a time when people who once walked in darkness are being shown the great light that is salvation in Jesus.

You too, were once a people lost in darkness, held in captivity by your sin, impoverished and blinded by the wickedness of your sinful nature. But **Jesus Has the Power to Set You Free.** And that is exactly what He has done! As you take to heart that wonderful, good news, don't just bottle up that joy and security for yourself. Put it to work in your lives; share that news with the people God has placed into your lives so that they too can be released from despair and live out their lives in God's favor.

If Jesus were to appear as a guest preacher here today, we have no reason to expect that His message would be any different than it was for the people of Nazareth. He would point us to God's law and show us the wretched state that we have plunged ourselves into and He would proclaim the good news of the gospel, that our debt of sin has been forgiven, that He has set us free.

The truth is, every time we gather around God's Word, it is Jesus who is preaching to us. He is the Gospel. He is our Freedom. And He is the one who fills us with a hope that longs for the even greater fulfillment of that Day of the Lord's favor when we rest safe and secure in His arms forever, in heaven.

Amen.