

*Gracious and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. May our eyes be enlightened and our hearts enlivened for the furtherance of your will. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Who Is Jesus? A Prophet and Movement Founder  
Isa. 61:1-4, Lk. 4:14-30

The time was more than 500 years before the birth of Jesus. The place, a destroyed Jerusalem. The people were Israelites recently returned from exile in Babylon. Their high hopes of home as it used to be had been dashed by harsh realities on the ground. It was more conflict than comfort; more despair than joy. And then the poetic words of a prophet ring out, imagining newness, prodding possibility, evoking hope:

"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, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

In the gospel story today, Jesus has reclaimed these words *and made them his own*. These words from Isaiah imagine a world where those who mourn are comforted, where devastated places find new life, and where the Glory of God is on full display. These are the words that are going to define Jesus' prophetic ministry -- and give us direction for ours.

When Jesus shows up in the synagogue that day, he's been in the wilderness after a time of testing, trial and temptation. You would expect after such an ordeal he would be wiped out, but the story makes clear he's not empty, he's empowered. He's not drained, he's determined.

Jesus goes to the synagogue we're told, "as was his custom." In other words, this is a man who knows he's part of a larger story; and one *who's found his own place in that story*. So there he is, in his hometown synagogue when the attendant hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He stands up to read the scroll, and chooses the passage we've just read. And this passage is going to shape not only *what he does* in his ministry but *who he is* for the sake of the world.

After reading, he sits down to give some kind of explanation as was common in those days: "*Today, this scripture has come true right here in front of you*, he says...and everyone stares at him in amazement, as if to say, "*wait a second isn't that Joe's kid?...wow, he sure has changed.*" And for a moment we're not sure what's going to happen next....

I don't know about you, but I can easily imagine myself in the congregation that day, mesmerized by Jesus and frankly thrilled by the fact that -- *he's one of us!*

But then a strange thing happens. Jesus starts castigating the congregation: "*oh, I know what you're going to say; you'll call me a hypocrite, you'll want me to do some sign here like I did in Capernaum!...You think I'm only here for you...I know how you are!...the truth is prophets are never welcome in their hometown.*"

And then Jesus goes on to compare himself to Elijah and Elisha, these old prophets God sent to save outsiders and foreigners.... And we're thinking to

ourselves, “*what’s your problem Jesus? We were happy to have you back here in Nazareth; we were impressed with your rhetorical skill and the power of your very presence; we were proud, inspired, and hopeful. And now you’re telling us off and comparing yourself to long dead prophets? What’s your deal Jesus?*”

The reaction of the congregation is about what you’d expect I guess; and frankly, we can’t blame them for running Jesus out of town -- Because the truth is, the words of prophets aren’t always comforting. Very often what Jesus says can be pretty hard to hear. Sometimes it doesn’t fit our ideology or our political persuasions or affirm the choices we make in life– and sometimes, Jesus’ own words don’t conform to our image of who we think Jesus is.

This fall we’ve embarked on a journey of thinking about the Jesus we see in the stained glass window behind me. As the pastoral intern for this year, I was invited to be part of the Stained-glass taskforce beginning last spring, so I’ve been able to listen in on the conversation from the beginning. Early on, our taskforce realized that the conversation was not simply about the window though. It’s rooted in how we understand who Jesus is, and *who Jesus calls us to be as the community that bears his name.*

As we’ve seen the past few weeks, each gospel is a unique witness to the person and work of Jesus. And although the 4 gospels have a lot in common, each one has its own particular perspective on who Jesus is. That’s because there simply is no single portrait or one identity that can completely capture the fullness who he is.

The passage we’ve read today places Jesus in a long line of prophets stretching from Moses through Elijah, to Isaiah, Amos and Micah to name just a few. In our day the list might include well known people like Sojourner Truth, Dorothy Day or Mother Teresa; Martin Luther King Jr., or Oscar Romero. But a full list would also include countless faithful people who’ve heard God’s call and *found their place* in the story of God’s redeeming love made known in Jesus.

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of this particular story for understanding who Jesus is according to the gospel of Luke. Indeed for Luke more than any other gospel writer, Jesus is portrayed as a social prophet and movement founder. His speech in the Nazareth synagogue is not only the announcement of liberation for God’s people, but the beginning of a Spirit empowered movement that animates *us*, calls *us* and prods *us* -- *even today.*

Mark and Matthew tell the same story but it’s more rudimentary and halfway into their gospels. In Luke though, this story comes at the *very beginning* of Jesus’ ministry so it’s really a kind of mission statement for his entire program -- and ours. In Luke’s version we hear what happened in the synagogue and we listen to Jesus reach back into the words of the prophet Isaiah and claim them as his own prophetic identity. *Jesus has found his place in the story; he’s one anointed for the work of liberation and justice, healing and forgiveness.*

It's not long after the scene at Nazareth that Jesus moves on to Capernaum. And there he starts to embody his prophetic identity by healing the sick, casting out demons, and calling disciples. He's not just *teaching* about the kingdom of God though. Day by day, God's vision of creation restored and humanity redeemed is springing to life in Jesus through the power of the Spirit.

The prophetic acts of Jesus are never simply what they appear though. Jesus' acts are never *only* about the individual people involved. As Jesus scholar Marcus Borg often points out, the question is not "did it really happen that way," but rather "what do these stories mean... *for us?*"

As Jesus and his disciples travel from Galilee to Jerusalem, when demons are cast out, God's power is set over and against the very power of evil itself. When a woman is healed, God's desire that all would have abundant life becomes reality. When Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners, he's not just present to the people at the table, he's turning over social norms which exclude some and favor others. When Jesus talks about debt and taxes he's rebelling against a system of economic exploitation that quite literally sucked the life out of the poor.

And when Jesus calls disciples, it's not about joining a club – it's an invitation to be part of a Spirit-empowered movement. It's an invitation to find for ourselves a place in the same story that Jesus claimed for himself that day in the Nazareth synagogue.

In our day we are bombarded by stories quite literally, morning, noon and night: news stories and sports stories, celebrity stories, financial stories, talk shows, sit-coms, npr interviews and blog entries, twitter tweets, Facebook likes, and a thousand other voices; constantly there, constantly seeking to define us, constantly trying to tell us who we are and what we should do, what we should buy or how we should live....

.....But our baptism, beckons us into a different kind of story..... In baptism *we too* are anointed by the Spirit and claimed by God. In baptism we are drawn into the universal body of Christ and a particular community of faith. Through our baptism we are given a place at the table and a part in a story that is much bigger than any of us, but one that includes all of us. But it's a very different story from the one we're surrounded by.

In this story the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly are lifted up; the hungry are filled with good things....and the rich are sent away empty. In this story captives find release and people burdened by sin and brokenness...*find forgiveness and freedom*. Outcasts are welcomed and the blind see. In this story, debts are cancelled and *people get to go home and start over*.

Jesus found *his* place in this story and our baptism invites us to *find ours*. Being drawn into this story reminds us that our true identity lies not in the ways others try to define us or by the brokenness and imperfection of our lives. Our identity lies in our baptism. In baptism we are drawn into the very life of Christ and the community that bears his name. And we are anointed -- just as Jesus was -- to proclaim good news to the poor and release to the captives, sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. Thanks be to God. Amen.

