

PROCLAIM HOPE
Isaiah 61: 1-3; Luke 4: 16-21

When I left seminary, I remembered my preaching professor's guidance that a sermon was intended "to instruct, to delight, and to inspire." Since I left seminary in 1981, fewer and fewer people know their Bibles, even if they own one. Some get piece-meal answers from the internet or make leaps of understanding on their own. So the goal of preaching in our day needs to be weighted toward instruction. For December I committed to a church wide series of classes and sermons on the theme of "Hope." On the 5th we examined the the Genesis story of Creation, where God created everything, and juxtaposed it with what the mystical leaning John said about the Jesus—he called him The Word—who was present in the beginning too! Genesis described what God created, while John described that creation with the insights of an artist. Last week I said that we should hope God is still looking for more people to become holy collaborators, just as God invited Moses to be a holy collaborator to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt, and Mary and Joseph to be holy collaborators to be mother and stepfather to God's Son. They said "Yes," and we have been invited to say "yes" to God's requests too. Today, as we continue to embrace hope-filled messages, we once again connect an Old Testament passage with a New Testament passage. In week one we examined Genesis and John; in week two we considered Exodus and Luke; today we examine Isaiah and Luke as a grown Jesus begins to announce the purpose of his ministry. Did you hear that? Jesus, in his own hometown, was announcing the purpose of his God-instructed work! Could it be that Jesus' purpose then is what he hopes we are doing now? It is interesting that when Pastor Rick Warren published his wildly successful book *The Purpose Driven Life*, neither our Isaiah passage nor our Luke passage were included in that book. But our Lord Jesus in Nazareth described his purpose for others to hear. Will we pick up his mantel and carry on the purpose driven life that he claimed for himself?

First, let's see what Jesus decided to change when he quoted Isaiah. He's not the first or last to edit words he read. I have often found inspiration and instruction when reading books about our hymns and carols. I was struck when I read an original verse of a beloved Christmas Carol—O Come All Ye Faithful. With words that clearly came from the Nicene Creed, one verse has been radically changed or omitted in most hymnals. Originally the second verse read: "God of God, Light of light, Lo, He abhors not the Virgin's womb. Very God, begotten, not created. O come let us adore him; O come let us adore him; O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord." My, that was an awkward sentence! "God abhors not the Virgin's Womb." Our hymnal includes that verse but made the line much less harsh: "Born of a Virgin, a mortal he comes." Hymn editors make changes like that over the years, and Jesus chose, it seems, to edit out one line of Isaiah's description of what the Kingdom would be like when Messiah comes. Isaiah offers these words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (and here's the part Jesus omits) *and the day of vengeance of our God*. Jesus edits that part out of his proclamation, *even though it was clearly in the Scripture he was reading from Isaiah!* Jesus' purpose is almost exactly what Isaiah said, but not quite; no day of vengeance was included.

Second, in chapter 4 of Luke we are taken to Jesus' hometown. He is about to begin his ministry; he was just tested by the devil and came out of the desert. He chose to go to his synagogue. Many people over the years have loved to quote the title of Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again* as truth, and Jesus certainly found his visit home a rough one. Who would have known that after Jesus

said those words that townspeople would drive Jesus out of town and try to stone him! Wow. It seems that it was fine for the Spirit of the Lord to be upon Isaiah, but *not* fine for the same Spirit to fill Jesus! Listen to Jesus' edited version of Isaiah's words: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

What message was God trying to send his people Israel? What message was Jesus trying to send to Nazareth and Jerusalem? *And what message might Jesus be trying to proclaim today, perhaps through me, or you, or someone else you have heard?* As fewer people listen to words from preachers in church pulpits; as fewer support or attend churches, we wonder what the next reformation of the church will be like. After all, about every 500 years historically the church has gone through a reformation. The last one was now 504 years ago! Could we be on the cusp of a new reformation? As many in our workforce have stepped away from their jobs, we have vacancies for pastors all over the country. What might be the next phase for congregations? Jesus give us great guidance: offer good news to the oppressed; bind up the brokenhearted; proclaim liberty to captives; release to prisoners and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Back in 1996 novelist John Updike wrote a book about a minister who lost his faith in God. I asked for the book for Christmas that year and got it. The hook for me was that it was about a Presbyterian minister. I was expecting an uplifting story, like reading Catherine Marshall's true account about her Presbyterian minister husband Peter Marshall in her book *A Man Called Peter*. But this novel was not that. It was about a man who had lost his faith in God. Still, I read it: *In the Beauty of the Lilies*, it was called. The character in the book was Clarence

Wilmot. Carol Lakey Hess who was Associate Professor of Religious Education at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta made this comment about the main character:

This novel is the tale of a turn-of-the-century minister, Clarence Wilmot, who lost his faith in the God he was taught in seminary. The God Wilmot was taught—rationalistic, all powerful and in control—made no sense in the light of the poverty he was seeing around him....At one point in his ministry, Wilmot decided against expanding the church buildings; he could not justify adding underused ecclesiastical structures when poor [people] down the street slept six to a room. [Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2009, p. 288.]

Wilmot left the ministry and became a peddler of encyclopedias “to people who could not afford them but bought them anyway.” Feasting, p. 288]

The book was a depressing, unsatisfactory read, but it brings into focus a call from Isaiah and a purpose declared by Jesus: what is *our* purpose in the world? According to our Lord: it is to preach good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and set at liberty those who are oppressed. In the magnificent words shared in remembrance of Senator Bob Dole a week ago, Francis of Assisi was famous for saying: “*Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.*” Amen!

So finally, we, together, are preaching the Gospel each week in so many ways beyond these walls: by bringing food contributions according to the Reverse Advent calendars many of us are following. That food re-supplies our the Port Orange Food Pantry. People here today have helped to staff that pantry! We also have church members who are actively working with our local Habitat for Humanity chapter building decent places for people to live. We have people in our church whose funds have helped create food and housing for young families, some of whom have been highlighted in the News Journal’s series called “Food Brings Hope.” Last week we were messengers of love, delivering Christmas gifts to children who would have had none; and delivering cards to those unable to get out and about. Thirty-six years

ago we committed, with other area Presbyterian Churches, to create a Presbyterian Counseling Center to bring help and hope to people in many stages of disfunction, sorrow, or struggle, and we have active Board members here today We also are supporting Commissioned Pastor Tobias Caskey as he reorganizes a mission of Westminster called New Corinthians Community Mission at a location in Daytona Beach, soon to restart worship services, and offer a 12-step program called “Celebrate Recovery” to helping men get back them in touch with God, their Higher Power. Many of them will be living in that new location. And unlike Clarence Wilmot’s decision not to expand his church facilities, we just paid off our magnificent newest addition-Peninsula Hall-that we dedicated in 2015! We have done, and are still doing, all those things through your financial gifts, food items, and prayers! We are carrying out the next chapter of Jesus’ purpose driven life. We are following what Jesus believed he was sent to do on that fateful day in Nazareth, because we are the body of Christ! He never looked back, and neither should we. Let us always remember that we are the church; not a club! And as St Francis once put it, let’s continue to “Preach the Gospel at all times, [and] use words if necessary.”

Let us pray:

Dear Holy Jesus, you have given us a sharp picture of our purposeful lives; a picture of what your Kingdom might look like if we carry through with your plan. We will reach people dealing with hunger, bring help and hope to those recently incarcerated, we will acknowledge and act on the anguish of injustice, and see the great needs of people in our world. Let the servant church arise as your Body, to be your hands, and feet and heart in all that we do. Fill us and use us, Spirit of the Living God. Amen.

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