

God's Favor

E3-19, Jan. 27, 2019
Lk 4:14-21

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Jesus returned from confronting the devil in the wilderness.
He begins his mission of redemption, release, and restoration of righteousness.
He speaks of *good news*,
 not saccharine sympathies empty of remedy
 but Good News of God's justice since times of old.

We don't read the *Old Testament* much anymore,
 which is our loss because the story of Jesus is *culmination* of the Old Testament.
Just hearing the gospels without knowing the Old Testament
 is like watching the dramatic conclusion of a movie without watching everything leading up to it.
This morning I *very briefly* jump to the middle of the story
 and tell about one part of God's dramatic story.
You have heard of King David and King Solomon,
 the great kings of Israel.
Following their rule came a series of disastrous kings,
 progressively worse until the kingdoms fall to foreign empires
 and people made refugees and slaves.
The story of Ezra and Nehemiah takes place *after* the kingdoms fall.
Leaders of Israel were carted off to Babylon, modern-day Iraq,
 so that they could not cause any mischief in the conquered land.
Laborers and farmers were left behind.
The Babylonians kept them around
 to do the manual labor in the occupied land under Babylonian bosses.
A few decades later, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persian Empire.
Under the Persians,
 the Hebrew exiles were *allowed to return* to their homeland.
In the decades they were away,
 the laborers and farmers had no leaders,
 no teachers to tell them of their heritage,
 no opportunities to remember their own history.
They inter-married with those of other religions
 and soon their own beliefs were lost to the foreign religions.
The Hebrews lost their identity and forgot the ways of God.

Ezra was one of the exiled Hebrew leaders who returned home.
He came back to his own country
 to find that the people there had been oppressed so long
 that they had no hope,
 they were poor and dying,
 they knew very little of God and the righteous ways of God.
So Ezra set a day for a public reading of the Bible
 so that everyone could hear and know God.
It was a tremendous *gift*
 to those who knew nothing of God's mercy and plan for them.
Church carries on that gift.
Church exists as gift and testimony to those who do not know God.
Church is the visible Good News of God's presence and favor.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus came home.
Jesus came to Nazareth where he had been brought up.
He came home to Nazareth after have been in exile in the wilderness,
 paralleling the story in Nehemiah of Israel's exiled leaders returning home.

He comes to the synagogue and reads from the holy scriptures
 about God's plan to release those oppressed,
 to bring hope and promise to the poor,
 to proclaim God's kingdom now come for all.
 The story of Jesus continues out of God's work *throughout* the history of Israel.
 The Church, this church, are the chapters still being written,
 of God's story of redemption and mercy;
 this day, with you people, God's story continues.

It says in the Gospel of Luke
 that, after finishing temptation and sparring with the devil in the wilderness,
 Jesus "returned in the power of the Spirit."
 Power is basically of two types, that of *command* and that of *nurture*.
 The power to command moves and accomplishes *by force*.
 We elect leaders to make decisions and get things done.
 It is the type of power that dominates and controls and protects.
 In this world we need power that protects from dangers.
 We need power that pushes against resistance so that progress is made.
 Such power sometimes comes across as bossing around,
 but we put up with it in order to get things done.
 And such power taken too far becomes
 bullying, domination, abuse,
 racial profiling, tyranny, injustice.
 Power of command can only control and coerce.
 It cannot give life or joy.

But there is the other kind of power,
 a power that *causes life to flourish*.
 There is a kind of power *that drives* this world to live and thrive.
 This other kind of power
 acts as counter to that which dominates and controls.
 This other kind of power drives life and bring joy.

"Jesus returned in *the power of the Spirit...*"
 begins our reading from Luke.
 This kind of power counters dominating power.
 This kind of power releases from domination.
 This kind of power calls to account the overreach of control.
 This kind of power heals and restores and rebuilds.
 As it is told in the Gospel of Luke,
 these verses are *the beginning* of Jesus' work in the world.
 Jesus announces that
 from now on there is a *new* power in the world,
 from now on there is a *new* kingdom,
 a *new* government,
 a *new* way of doing things,
 from now on the prevailing power will be
that which releases and welcomes and risks.

Be sure there are risks!
 Taking down those walls that protect does open us up to risk.
 But those very walls that protect,
 those policies and laws and traditions that keep us safe,
 are also what keep us imprisoned.
 The walls we erect out of fear will stifle and desiccate and divide.
 Fear of differences, fear of uncertainty, fear of loss walls off God's Spirit.
 There is risk; risk is the flip side of faith.

Faith is taking the risk that God is reliable and will bring us to a better place.
 Faith is risking it all on God to act.

In my short time so far at this church

I am impressed with the risks and dismantling of walls
 you people brave.

I have already experienced your hospitality and welcome.

I am at home with your progressive values and openness to all people.

This building is beautiful and you have kept it well.

It is pleasure simply seeing its beauty!

I know the challenges of keeping a building repaired and challenges of its cost.

Yet, though building and money are important,

they are secondary to the programs of care and nurture that happen here.

I had the pleasure of experiencing confirmation this week.

Your youth are bright and enthused.

Programs of education and service

to homebound, food-challenged, ill and others is commendable.

But program, even so faithful and effective,

are secondary to people,

are only valid to the extent people are blessed.

People over programs, programs over property,

but still, people's needs and wants take second to God and God's purpose for us.

We all have opinions and preferences

and even feel strongly about some.

The faith challenge is listening to what God desires for this church and neighborhood.

God's purpose, God's calling for Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church

takes priority over individual's preferences, good programs and pretty building.

Jesus knew his purpose,

good news to the poor and powerless,

release to those captivated by sin and sin's consequences,

recovery of sight to blind, both those who are unable to see and to those unwilling to see,

freedom to those oppressed by injustice,

proclaiming the Lord's favor and delight

even in this world of anger, aggression and amorality.

What is the place of church in all this?

What is church in God's mission?

What is Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church's place

in God's mission in this corner of Minneapolis in the coming years?

This is the key question for our time this year.

We are part of God's bigger purpose.

This church is not alone in the world.

We confess that we are part of God's universal, catholic church

with partners within blocks and partners across continents.

This morning we hear of potential partnerships with two other churches.

The issue is not whether we want to do this or what we might lose.

The issue is *what God* asks of us

for greater witness and greater effectiveness in this corner of Minneapolis.

Apart from what any of us want or fear,

is this partnership *what God wants* for our churches at this time?

We do not know the answer yet.

No one knows yet whether this is God's desire.

The answer will have to come from

personal prayer, conversations, pondering, and listening to one another.

The Holy Spirit of God is never in a holding pattern.

God's Spirit is about in the world, creating, nurturing, protecting, reclaiming, restoring.

This interim time cannot be a holding pattern or the Spirit may pass us by.

This interim time is a perfect time

to examine again *what is church*,

what is *Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church's purpose*,

what is *God asking of this church* in the larger picture of God's universal church.

This interim time is a perfect time

to examine the place of *this church*

in God's mission of release to captives,

recovery to blind and misguided,

freeing from oppression,

proclaiming God's favor.

This interim time is the perfect time

to vigorously continue the hospitality and warm welcome you already give,

to listen with greater intent to the Holy Spirit appearing in one another's experiences,

to step past fears, risk uncertainty and see what God is up to next.

I look forward to an exciting, blessed time with you.

God bless you all!