



ANTI-INCARCERATION DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, March 2, 2008

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Lection – Luke 4:14-30 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. (v. 15) He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. (v. 16) When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, (v. 17) and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: (v. 18) “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, (v. 19) to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (v. 20) And he rolled

up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. (v. 21) Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (v. 22) All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” (v. 23) He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor, cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum’.” (v. 24) And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown. (v. 25) But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; (v. 26) yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. (v. 27) There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” (v. 28) When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. (v. 29) 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. (v. 30) But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

I. Description of Liturgical Moment

Prematurely, we rejoiced in our freedom on Watch Night. The thirteenth amendment outlawed one form of slavery and established the legitimacy of another. Section 1 of this amendment reads “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted* [emphasis mine], shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

In 1865, in order to oversee the operation of the only legally remaining slave plantation, an association was founded. It is known today as the American Correctional Association. The plantation that its members have operated since 1865 is the prison plantation. We were set free from one plantation only to have many of the best, the brightest, as well as the mentally ill driven to another. As we watched our family members roped for the prison plantation, many of us who have remained free have avoided mental illness with the help of a much-needed delusional coping mechanism: denial. For over a century and a half, millions of African Americans have been imprisoned or jailed. By adopting as truth the propaganda of white supremacists, for example, “Blacks do not want to learn,” “they have no morals,” “they do not want to work,” and “they are animals,” we avoid the ugly truth. Our re-enslavement was immediate and intentional; it required no written plan; we are not free. If I am my brother and sister’s keeper (Gen. 4:1-9), then as long as he/she is not free from oppression, our exodus is incomplete. We are not free. Slavery is not over.

As we come to this liturgical moment, we do so with a heightened awareness of the injustices associated with what I call the criminal torture system. Our nation incarcerates African Americans at a rate more than six times our representation in the general population. Social policies and practices before, during, and after imprisonment can be described as nothing less than torturous and inhumane. We lead South Africa, China, and Russia in the incarceration of our citizens. African American Christians are the most

recent benefactors of God's captive freeing agenda on U.S. soil. Our collective testimony demands that we address the bondage of individuals in our community. We must proclaim within our community, and beyond its borders, to all of those who understand the divine kinship of humankind, that the oppressed must go free—now.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 4:14-30

Part One: Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

I have heard it said that “adversity produces character.” I say, “adversity destroys character in those who sit by, do nothing, and watch.” Yahweh clothed himself with the same human flesh in which we are temporarily housed because Yahweh is not a God who sits by, does nothing, and watches.

Certainly, our Holy Scriptures teach that the responsibility for immoral activity rests squarely on the one who transgresses decency and honor. One might be led to say that criminals have only themselves to blame. Yet, God does not view our context that way. Each of us has a felony record in God's sight. Therefore, God shows no partiality toward us and no greater judgment toward the world's criminals. Since we first learned to reject our own, thereby imitating the most unholy practices of white Christianity, Christ-professing lawmakers have happily prepared legislative pathways for our re-enslavement. The prison plantation has happily shackled the brothers and sisters whom we have self-righteously rejected. Those who were not welcomed in our churches, at the Lord's table, or in our high society clubs because they lacked proper Eurocentric, western, middleclass attire, vernacular, and income, the prison has shackled. Those born out of wedlock—shackled. Our homosexual kinfolk—shackled. Our under-educated kinfolk—shackled. Our women and children whose cries of abuse we ignored and for whom we sought no treatment have turned to drugs, pornography, and prostitution. They too are shackled. Men who attend church and some who do not beat their wives and rape their daughters, as we say “It is none of our business.”—we are shackled.

What was none of our business has become big business. One day soon, there will be a prison near us, just waiting for our children and grandchildren to be neglected and rejected enough to turn to criminal activity and gangs. They too will be shackled to work for 70 or 80 cents a day making the dishrags with which we clean our china. It may be encouraging to witness the current national sensitivity toward change within the criminal justice system; however, we must never forget the lessons of our history. Positive and holy energy is often met with attack and retrenchment. That is why I am honored to participate in the ministry of an organization (The Exodus Foundation - www.exodusfoundation.org) whose mission it is to stop the flow of African Americans to prison.

In our lection, before we meet the Jesus who promises our deliverance in Luke 4:18-19, that very same Jesus meets the devil. On Anti-Incarceration Sunday, we too encounter the devil. On a planet where billions of people are coerced to *fast* by starvation, we, like Jesus, are being tempted with more bread than we need (Luke 4:3). We are tempted to

take authority over kingdoms of self-pleasure, material plenty, and power by simply making false choices in the pursuit of happiness (Luke 4:6); we are tempted to put God to the test by sowing Mercedes seeds that demand a *guarantee* of protection and blessing. Jesus said “No” to each of these promises of status. Status itself was not bad to Jesus. Jesus eventually had status among his followers. Harriet Tubman, Maggie Lena Walker, Mother Theresa, Rosa Parks, Coretta Scott King and Martin Luther King, Jr. all had status. However, status that sprouts from the devil’s theology is demonic. The devil failed, departed, and waited for an opportune time to return (Luke 4:13) because Jesus said “No” to the devil’s theology. Therefore, the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, in our life and preaching on Anti-Incarceration Sunday, but especially in our lives, to reject the devil’s offer (Luke 4:5-14), be filled with God’s Spirit (Luke 4:14), and make the liberating proclamation (Luke 4:18-19) with which we will be consistently rewarded... with a cross (Luke 23:33).

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

It is impossible to read Luke’s Gospel without noting the attention he gives to the work of the Spirit. More than any other Gospel, Luke recounts the activity of the third member of the Trinity, and here he describes the Holy Spirit as the chief impetus for the action in the narrative. Our community values the unction of the Spirit. It is necessary, therefore, to pay special attention to what the Spirit led Jesus to do in this scripture passage. In this passage, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (ei[neken) *heineken* “because” of the things that he is anointed to do. The evidence of the Spirit’s anointing was not in Jesus’ assertion that it was the “year of favor,” or as we might say today, “when the praises go up, the blessings come down” (v. 19). **Instead, the anointing was for action on behalf of the poor, the captives, the physically challenged, and the oppressed (v. 18). This is the anointing that falls upon us.**

Luke 4:14-30 is often called Jesus’ initial sermon. It marks the occasion when the author of the Third Gospel, known to us as Luke, describes the introduction of Jesus’ public ministry. It immediately follows temptation by the devil (4:1-13). Back in his hometown of Nazareth, the weekly Sabbath services provide the occasion for this defining proclamation. Jesus stood up, and someone handed him the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolled it to the section that included Isaiah 61:1-2. He read a prophecy of restoration before those gathered there. We might expect this local-common peasant preacher to evoke immediate disdain from his neighbors, but their initial reaction was positive. Jesus’ fellow worshippers were unanimous in their praise of him (v. 22).

And is it not true, that when making a liberating proclamation, we are initially embraced? This is similar to the praise a pastor or leadership team first receives for launching a prisoner re-entry ministry in the church. But then, those “felons” and their friends arrive at “our” church with cigarette breath “cussing” and “wearing pants that hang down too low for us.” When the pastor cannot perform overnight miracles on the formerly incarcerated saints in the making, his/her very own congregation may turn praise into pragmatism, “it can’t be done here pastor,” “they might steal from us” “their needs are too great for us.” The possibility of partnering with other congregations and local

agencies is never considered. Jesus notes in Luke 4:24, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.” When Jesus chastised them for their unbelief, for their lack of hope for others, for their inability to persevere, the once adoring crowd began a background check “Is this not Joseph’s son?” (v. 22). Jesus’ hearers were status hungry. Jesus lacked the devil’s theology and therefore he did not have the counterfeit status they sought. How could someone with Jesus’ background teach them? How could they embrace someone with so little status? Living under the heel of Roman Imperial, oppression made the synagogue eager to hear a liberating proclamation for status seekers only. Jesus’ message had universal appeal. They wanted to see outcomes quickly as they had heard about in other cities. They had little respect for the crosses they would need to carry in order to be made ready for God’s outcomes. When Jesus called into question their faithfulness, they wanted to kill him. Such was Jesus’ welcome to the Gospel ministry.

The proclamation of God’s liberating power will often be challenged by the very people God is seeking to liberate: both those who have a “bad” background and those who “think” they do not. Sometimes, God’s servants will be led out of town. It is also the case that God’s servants may be embraced by a community that has already surrendered to God’s process. In whatever situation we find ourselves, we must not resist. Like our Messiah, we must keep moving toward the cross. If the brethren want to lead us to a cliff, we must pass through the midst of them and go on our way (v. 30). To get angry with people who are not ready to be liberated is counter productive. Like Jesus, save righteous anger for the battle ahead (Luke 20:45). Twice in our text, we find the Greek (afesij) *aphesis*, “release.” The Spirit has given us a charge to proclaim release. Let go. Release judgment. Release vengeance. Release unjust laws. Healing, restoration and salvation come through release not condemnation. The lesson offered here for Anti-Incarceration Sunday (which I also term Justice Sunday) can be summarized in this way: releasing those considered undeserving of release, carries a sentence of a lifetime cross. Any Christian who does not want a lifetime cross—does not want Christ. We should save the devil a return trip and go back to the wilderness, famished and worn out, and accept the devil’s theology and his *guaranteed* blessings (v. 4:3). For that is precisely what we have done when we embrace the Savior’s good news but reject his cross (Luke 14:27).

Celebration

Praise be to God that we have an opportunity to be the hands, feet, and mouths that offer liberation to the captive, friendship to the friendless, and a hand-up to those who are down. God chose us for such work at such a time as this; how marvelous to have been chosen. We give thanks and praise that the one who delivered us has given us a chance to show our appreciation by working to deliver someone else. This is our response to the hymn that ask, “How Can I Say thank you, for all the things you’ve done for me?”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: The synagogue; the book from which Jesus read; the attendant handing Jesus the book of Isaiah; the image of a closed (shut up) heaven; blind who receive their sight; the healing of the brokenhearted; the liberation of the oppressed; the cliff that awaited Jesus;

Sounds: Murmuring of those in the temple after Jesus announced why he had been sent; the sound of wrath of those who wanted to remove Jesus from the city; and

Textures: The texture of the scroll from which Jesus read.