

## The King Came: To Liberate Captives

Luke 4:14-30

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Dan Hoffman

Go ahead and open your Bibles to Luke chapter 4. This morning we are getting a late start on Advent as Nikki and I have been out of town for the last two Sundays. So we are jumping into the season a bit late, but we are going to jump in anyway because Advent is one of the most important seasons of the church calendar.

Advent, in case you are unfamiliar or need a reminder, derives from a Latin word that means “coming.” And it refers to two times in history as well as a prevailing attitude. The first time of Advent referred to the period that began in Genesis 3:15. This is when God spoke to the snake in the garden and said “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel.” God said, “Satan, you’ve messed up My creation, but watch out because a time is coming when I’m going to fix things. And it’s going to involved your head being crushed, so wait for that.”

And of course this first season of Advent ended with the birth of a baby in Bethlehem 2000 years ago. While almost nobody recognized it, the time of waiting for God to breath redemption into His sin-broken world had been fulfilled in Jesus.

The second period of Advent began with Jesus’ ascension back to heaven and His promised return. Jesus said:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me... (John 14:1-3)

And so we are living in the period of the second Advent today. And it will end when Jesus fulfills His promise and returns, victorious, to collect His children and bring us to the place He has prepared.

So Advent refers to two seasons of time in history. But it also refers to an attitude. And that’s because it isn’t enough just to live in one of these two seasons – indeed almost all of humanity has lived their entire lives in one of these two seasons – rather Advent refers to an expectation of imminent fulfillment. It is about encouraging us to live lives motivated by a desire to please the God who is coming back.

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Now the question of what it looks like to live a life of expectation in regards to Jesus’ second advent is what we are going to spend our time discussing over the next three Sundays. And to do this we are going to examine three things Jesus accomplished by coming in the first place, and then look at the implications of what it means for us to live in light of these three things.

As an aside, if you've got friends who are asking questions about Jesus and the meaning of life this is a great time to invite them to church because these three Sundays are about finding the good life God wants for us – this is the gospel.

Today we are going to look at His goal to liberate captives that He describes in Luke 4. But as we get started I want to reference a quick verse out of 2 Timothy. When the Apostle Paul was seeking to encourage Timothy to live a Christ honouring life and successfully pastor the church in Ephesus he said:

Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel (2 Timothy 2:8)

Now this is a strange encouragement to give a pastor – remember Jesus. I mean I don't think Timothy was likely to forget who Jesus was. Nor do I think we are likely to forget Jesus. And yet the call to remember Jesus sits at the very center of Paul's message to Timothy.

Paul's point, which is just as important now as it was then, is that remembering Jesus isn't about keeping some facts straight about Him in our minds. It is about living out the reality of who Jesus was and is. And Paul says "this is my gospel." This is what I'm preaching. Jesus is the good news.

So let's look now at Luke 4 starting in verse 14. This is Jesus arriving on the scene at the very beginning of His ministry and defining for us who He is and what He is about. Would you stand with me as we read this text?

[Luke 4:14-30]

You may be seated.

This is the account of Jesus establishing why He had come and what He was setting out to accomplish. And what we get is a powerful gospel.

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Now this story takes place in a synagogue. And synagogues in the first century were like churches today. Usually they had their own building, but they didn't have to. Like today a synagogue just referred to a group of Jews meeting to read scripture and pray and then someone would expound or preach on the text that was read.

And in order for a synagogue to be in session it required the presence of 10 men. So it wasn't synagogue when it was you and your Jewish buddy at Starbucks. It only happened when a group gathered in YHWH's name. And they didn't have pastors per say, but one man would be selected to lead each week, and they would be in charge of doing the reading and expounding on the text. And Jesus was a traveling rabbi, so He was often got this honour, and that's what's taking place here.

So Jesus is given the scroll of Isaiah. And He unrolled it, verse 17 tells us, to Isaiah 61. And it is from there that He reads. And then He tells everyone “I’ve just fulfilled this Scripture.

Now this isn’t a mistake. Isaiah is a big book. It has lots to say about lots of topics. It has rules and judgments and ways God wants His people to live, but Jesus didn’t choose one of those texts to describe His ministry, instead He chose a text about gospel, a text about good news.

And this is what the rest of Jesus’ ministry was about. For the rest of Luke Jesus acts out the things this text describes. He preaches good news, He liberates the oppressed. He elevates the down trodden. He heals the sick. He has a gospel ministry.

Now you might remember back in April we started a series titled “Life in the Kingdom.” And this series was built up around the question “What is the gospel anyway?” And I think you would agree that this is an important question for Christ followers to know the answer to. But the answer seems to be not as obvious as you might think.

You see, like many, I grew up thinking the gospel was the steps a person had to take in order to get saved. So the 4 Spiritual Laws was the gospel. First, God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. Second, people sinned and are separated from God and His wonderful plan. Third, Jesus is God’s answer to our sin problem. And fourth, We need to place our faith in Him to experience His salvation and get back to God’s wonderful plan. So to tell someone the gospel meant to tell them how to be saved.

The problem with this is that when Jesus talked about the gospel, which He did a lot, He never described it as the steps for how to be saved. For Jesus, the gospel simply had very little to do with going to heaven when we die – that wasn’t the main part of His good news.

So what did Jesus think the gospel was? Well, He described it very succinctly in Mark 1 saying:

“The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15)

So the good news, or the gospel, for Jesus was that the kingdom of God had come near. That’s the good news. God is here now. His kingdom is at hand. And we can orient our lives around that kingdom.

Now we don’t talk a lot about kingdoms these days, so that requires some explaining. But in that series we saw that a person’s kingdom is the extent to which the influence of their rule is felt. And every being has a kingdom. You have a kingdom. I have a kingdom. Even your dog has a kingdom where its rule and influence is felt – it is small, and it has to make sure it doesn’t conflict with the cat, but your dog has influence and rule over something. And God has a kingdom. And God’s kingdom is the extent to which the influence of His rule is felt.

Now God holds the entire cosmos in the palm of His hand so in a very real sense His influence is felt everywhere. But that's not what His kingdom refers to here. God has always been omnipotent and omniscient and infinitely glorious. But with Jesus' arrival something changed. And that was that heaven began invading earth. God began indwelling people. He began writing His law on our hearts. He began transforming us to look like Jesus such that we bear His image in a way that hadn't been possible since the fall. And this effect is His kingdom. God's kingdom is present anywhere His will is being done on earth as it is in heaven. That's the extent His rule is felt.

And so when Jesus arrived He said "God's kingdom had come near." And He said this because He was perfectly working out the Father's will. So He obeyed the Father completely, and He did the Father's work. He extended the Father's love to those around Him. And He healed physical and emotional and spiritual sickness and restored people to right relationship with the Father. That was God's kingdom breaking into earth. And this didn't end when Jesus left. Jesus said the expanse of God's kingdom was going to increase after He left because He was going to send the Holy Spirit to fill people so that we would do the things He did, and even greater things.<sup>1</sup> So now we are part of God's kingdom as we bear Jesus' image and partner with Him to do the work of the Father to the increase of His glory.

This is the gospel, this was Jesus' good news. Namely that God's kingdom was invading our world and restoring it to the way He designed. And this is why Jesus chose Isaiah 61 to summarize His ministry. Because in this text it says "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news – gospel – to the poor." And this is what Jesus was about – good news to the poor.

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Now the word "poor" is an interesting one. When we hear it, we think economically poor. We think of people living in Haiti who've come through natural disaster and political corruption and systemic disease and as a result have so little money at their disposal that they are literally dying – that's poor.

And Jesus says the good news of His kingdom is aimed at people like this. And then Jesus was always alleviating the ailments of the poor. He heals blind beggars – that's poor – and delivers prostitutes and raises the children of widows – that's poor. Jesus loved extending God's grace to those who had no options.

But Jesus' gospel isn't only for the economically poor. In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus increased the width of the concept of poverty saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

Now the poor, or humble, in spirit are the opposite of the haughty in spirit. In other words, blessed are those who understand they don't deserve anything good from God. Blessed are those who ask for mercy because they know they deserve wrath. Those kind of people are the poor in spirit. And Jesus says they get the kingdom.

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<sup>1</sup> Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. (John 14:12)

Now the danger wealthy people like us need to come to grips with is that there is a very close link between the poor and the poor in spirit. And we've experienced this.

I mean isn't it true that when everything is going good for you - when there is money in the bank and food on the table and your children are serving the Lord – isn't it true that in those times it is rare to be hit profoundly with a deep sense of your desperate need for God? Isn't it rare in the good times, to fall on your face begging for mercy and pouring out your depravity at the foot of the cross? Hasn't that been rare for you?

But when the bottom falls out. When you lose your job. When poverty or sickness or oppression strike, isn't the name of God the first word out of our mouths?

Matthew and Luke are getting at this point. It is most often the financially poor who are poor in spirit; it is those who have physical needs that are aware of their spiritual needs.

But this doesn't mean the wealthy have no access to the good news of Jesus. There are lots of texts about wealthy saved people. But we have to understand the disadvantage we are at. We need to foster a deep sense of our desperation before God. And we need to do this in spite of the fact that we are virtually never desperate for anything. Jesus's gospel is only good news to the poor in spirit.

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And in the same vein Jesus goes on in verse 18 saying: "He sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners." Now is it just the physical captives that Jesus is interested in liberating? No, He is also interested in liberating those who are captives to sin.

And He proclaims "recovery of sight for the blind." Now is it just the physically blind that Jesus cares for? Of course not, He is also interested in healing those blinded by the god of this world.

And he came to "set the oppressed free." Is it just the physically or politically and psychologically oppressed that Jesus seeks to free? No, He also wants to free everyone who is in bondage to spiritual powers and principalities. Jesus' gospel is good news for everyone who needs God. Do you need God today?

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Jesus ends His quote from Isaiah with the words and "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Now what does the year of the Lord's favor refer to?

Well this was a colloquial way of referring to a Jewish tradition described in depth in Leviticus 25. We aren't going to read that chapter now, but if you want to look it up later go ahead, there is some very interesting stuff there. And another name for the year of the Lord's favor was the Year of Jubilee.

Now that probably sounds a bit more familiar. The idea here was based on the cycles of 7 that the Jewish world was built around. So there were 7 days in a week culminating in a Sabbath. And then there were certain things that repeated themselves every 7 years. But after 7 groups of 7 years there was a Year of Jubilee.

And this was the biggest year of the cycle. It was like a Sabbath year. So in the Year of Jubilee land would be returned to its owners, and slaves would be freed and loans would be forgiven. It was a year of celebrating God's goodness by demonstrating it to each other. It was about getting a clean slate.

Can you imagine what it would be like to get a clean slate? To have all your debts forgiven? I heard the story once of a farmer who came across a very nice sports car on the side of the road and a man in a very nice suit standing beside it looking perturbed.

So the farmer stopped and found out that the car had a flat tire. And the man was not the kind who knew how to change flat tires, and certainly didn't want to get his suit dirty. And so the farmer offered to change his tire. The man agreed and they chatted for a bit as the farmer jacked the car and swapped the flat with the spare.

When he was finished the man took a \$100 bill from his wallet and offered it to the farmer, but the farmer refused and said it was no big deal. Eventually the man said he wanted to send a thank you card and so asked for his address. The farmer obliged.

The next month when the farmer went to the bank to pay his mortgage he found out that it had been totally cleared by a guy named Bill Gates.

Now I don't know if that is a true story or not. I forget where I heard it. But could you imagine what life would be like to be out from under the burden of your mortgage? What kinds of things would you do differently? How much more generous would you be able to be? How much less stress would you have?

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Of course Jesus has done way more than that for us! I mean if you have a mortgage and you work hard enough and save hard enough and budget hard enough and stick to your payments for 20 or 30 years then you can pay it off. But Jesus has covered a debt we could never pay off.

Paul says:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. (Ephesians 2:1)

Sick people can crawl towards safety, poor people can scrimp together some savings, but dead people - they have no hope at all. But Jesus brought life to dead people.

In Romans it says:

The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. (Romans 8:7-8)

That means it isn't a matter of trying hard enough or working long enough, the reality is the debt we acquired was such that we could not submit to God's law and were totally unable to please God.

And it is to people like this that Jesus offers the Year of the Lord's Favor. This is Jesus' good news. You, even you, can have a right relationship with God because of Jesus. In Christ we have been liberated to live a life to the glory of God.

Now we know all this, but we forget. If you've been around the church for any number of Christmases then you know that Emanuel – God with us – brought salvation to sinners. And from familiarity we grow numb to the message. But this isn't just a problem for us, even the people Jesus saw face to face were numb to His message. This is the human condition.

So after Jesus read this passage from Isaiah 61 He rolled the scroll up and sat down. And the text says everyone looked at Him in amazement and spoke well of Him.

Verse 23 says everyone was amazed that Jesus was so gracious. And you can just see their pride as they lean over to each other and say "Isn't that Joseph's boy? He's one of ours isn't He?"

And this would have been a great spot for Jesus to finish. He could have left on a high note and been invited out for lunch by the chairman of the board. But instead He goes on. And in two paragraphs of concluding speech He manages to convince everyone to throw Him off a cliff. Verse 28 says "All the people in the synagogue were furious.... They got up, drove Him out of the town, and took Him to the brow of the hill on which the town was built, in order to throw Him off the cliff."

Now as a speaker I know the difference between a successful conclusion and one that flops. And I've had my share of those. But I've never gone from offering people good news to attempted murder in two paragraphs. That takes skill! Jesus, what are you doing here?

Well there are three things in these two paragraphs that lead to these people's rejection of Jesus. You see Jesus didn't mess His conclusion up. He wasn't slapping Himself on the forehead afterward saying "man, I should have done that differently." Jesus' words here were calculated. He meant to confront the sin of His listeners. And it was that confrontation that sparked their rejection. So here are three dangers to avoid in order not to end up rejecting Jesus when He comes to us with His good news.

First, don't make Jesus' message too small.

So when Jesus said "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" He was claiming to be God's Messiah. People got that and they liked it. But they wanted Jesus to be Messiah and bring them blessing on their terms. But then Jesus gives two examples of God pouring out His blessing on other people.

So first we get a story of Elijah who shows up on the scene after a three and a half year famine. Everyone is starving to death, and particularly the widows of Israel would have been starving. And yet God sent Elijah to save a widow in Zarephath outside the community of believers.

And then He gives them a story of Elisha who is living in a time when leprosy is breaking out all over Israel and yet it is Naman the Syrian who gets healed.

And Jesus is saying, you are looking for God's blessing, but the blessing of My message isn't primarily for you Jews. It's for you to give away.

In Romans 15 Paul says:

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant for the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy. (Romans 15:8-9)

This means "Yes," Jesus was a Jew and God's salvation came through Jesus to the Jews first. God did that in order to keep the promises He had made to the patriarchs. But moreover, Jesus came that the Gentiles might glorify God.

So Jesus was saying God's salvation, and God's Messiah, wasn't just for the Jews, it is for everyone. And the Jews' job was to get this message out. And they couldn't get their minds around that. What's the point of being the chosen people if everyone is chosen?

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So first, if you want to avoid rejecting Jesus' good news don't make His message too small. Don't make it only for you. God's salvation is for you, and it's for you to give away.

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Second, don't be scandalized by the scope of His radical grace. Look back at verse 19. Here Jesus ends His quote from Isaiah with the words "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Keep your finger there, but flip back to Isaiah chapter 61, because this isn't where Isaiah ends. Jesus doesn't quote the whole passage. In fact, He stops right in the middle of a sentence. So Isaiah 61 reads:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,  
because the LORD has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim freedom for the captives  
and release from darkness for the prisoners,  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor  
and the day of vengeance of our God... (Isaiah 61:1-2)

And it keeps going. But Jesus doesn't include the part about God's vengeance. Now this isn't because He doesn't agree with God's prophecy in Isaiah, but He is saying while God's judgment is coming, My ministry is about the Lord's favor.

He says the same thing in John 3:17, right after He says "For God so loved the world," He says "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

But the Jews wanted vengeance. And if you've ever been wrongfully hurt you've probably wanted vengeance too. The Jews wanted God to kick the Romans out of their land. But Jesus says leave vengeance out of it. I'm the Messiah, but I'm about God's favor for everyone not His judgment. And people couldn't get their minds around that. They didn't want to believe God would save their enemies. They were scandalized by His radical grace and so rejected His good news. Don't do that.

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Third, and finally, they rejected Jesus' gospel because of the relevance of Jesus' message. So it didn't just bother them that God was going to save the Gentiles and not kick the Romans out of the Promised Land, it filled them with wrath that Jesus would say they needed God's salvation just as much as the Romans did. This was offensive!

And this is just as hard for us in the church today. You see, we like to think we are good people. But the message of Christmas is that Emanuel has come because none of us are good; we are all sin trapped captives in need of liberation. Jesus simply won't save us unless we need Him to. And this scandal has offended many strong people. It's only the needy who are saved.

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So friends, Jesus' gospel is good news for the poor. It's news that Jesus came to liberate captives and invite them to be part of His kingdom. And the question for all us today is do you need His salvation? Are you poor in spirit? Or have you grown proud of how good you are?

This text calls us to remember Jesus Christ. It calls us to encounter the truth again that the King came; and this is what Christmas is about. And His message is one that breathes life into every person who finds themselves surrounded by the mess of a sin broken world and in need of a Saviour. So grab hold of that today. Come needy to God. Come hungry for His undeserved and radical grace. Don't be turned off that He saves people you think are worse than you. The gospel of Christmas is that Emanuel came, God is among us.