

Good News
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
January 24, 2016
Luke 4:14-21

Nazareth. It's a map dot, too small and too far away to be called a suburb of Jerusalem. Not much happens here. Life is slow. It always has been. It's just a community of farmers and fisherman and day laborers.

Comedian Anthony Clark, a native of a small town called Gladys, Virginia, used to joke that if you only had a year left to live, you should move to Gladys, because every minute there seems like an eternity. There's just not a whole lot to do.

That's how I picture Nazareth – just an ordinary place. It was a place where people were waiting for something to happen.

And, the people of Nazareth had been waiting for a long time! In fact, all of Judaea had been waiting.

In the year 587, Babylonians sacked Jerusalem and exiled its inhabitants to far-away lands. After a half-century of exile, the survivors returned home to a desolate land. In the midst of this rebuilding, the prophet of Third Isaiah proclaimed good news:

The spirit of the Lord 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.

Good news indeed! God's people were once more about to become God's people. Israel would once more take its place among the nations. And the individual and collective burdens that crippled the people of Israel would soon be removed. God's world is coming, y'all. You'll see!

Fast forward six hundred years. It sure didn't feel like Isaiah's words had come true.

The Jewish people had traded one conqueror for another – first the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans. And in each kingdom, Israel knew its fair share of oppression, heartbreak, and captivity.

Nazarean peasants, in fact all Jewish peasants suffered. Their taxes fueled Herod's economy. His palaces grew more exquisite, his fisheries more profitable, his granaries more full, all at the expense of Israel's poorest. In 30 CE, people remembered Isaiah's words. But Isaiah's promise of God's reign sure didn't feel any closer.

But something was happening. Good news was stirring in the Galilee.

That's where today's lection begins. Luke's gospel tells us that us a special child has grown up. And he's been anointed by God, he's processed his calling in the wilderness, and now, filled with the Holy Spirit, he's started his ministry. Jesus is preaching up a storm in synagogues throughout the Galilee, and people are taking notice.

One day, the travelling evangelist hits the next leg of his tour: Nazareth, his own hometown.

And perhaps nobody was more equipped to understand Nazareth folk, to know the words they needed to hear, longed to hear, more than Jesus. I imagine that like so many of his fellow townspeople, he too had waited for something, anything to happen.

The men of the town hiked to the nearby city of Sepphoris to find work. They were day laborers – masons and farmers – their work wasn't steady; they made wages that always kept them behind. And what did this hard work bring them? Calloused hands. Aching bones. Liens on their property. Pots with too many vegetables and not enough chickens. And a perpetual cycle of poverty and hopelessness.

As Jesus and Joseph and other men hiked the six kilometers there and back each day, I wonder if they thought: "What hope is there in this? Will there ever be relief from the routine and the monotonous. Where is the promise of God's favor?"

Jesus knew the story of Nazareth. And Jesus knew the words his village needed to hear.

The good news brought good news.

Into the synagogue walked Jesus. He opened the scroll of his choosing, and proclaimed the words of Isaiah:

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

The spirit of the Lord is upon me. That's right, me, one who is just like you! Calloused hands. Threadbare Tunic. Dirty Sandals. The son of a day laborer.

And God has anointed me to bring good news to you! Plain ole' ordinary folk, who are extraordinary in God' eyes. God's favor is for you!

God has sent me to proclaim release to all who feel captive to a sense of blah, to a sense of monotony, to a sense of feeling ordinary. God is sending me to release you from the captivity of a world that is limited to political and economic and social constraints. God has sent me to free you from your dependence on the tangible.

God has sent me to help you recover your sight – to help you see that God's world will once more be God's world, no matter how hard the powers and principalities seek to tell you, "It is not so!"

God has sent me to free you from crippling systems of oppression: In God's world the need for human decency – a concern for the well-being of others – will trump the need for interest rates and personal gain.

God has sent me to declare a reset, a do-over. This is the year of the long-awaited Jubilee, the year when lands revert to their original owners, when debts are forgiven, when indentured servants are given freedom, when fields are not plowed – when people honor what they are created to be: God's people.

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

Having finished, Jesus rolled up the scroll, and took his seat. The synagogue was silent. Jesus' speech was the modern-day equivalent of a mic-drop.

And as he took his seat, every mouth was still silent, and every eye was upon him. The people were in awe. Is something finally happening in Nazareth?

Jesus confirms what the crowd senses: "Today, the scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

For the author of Luke, Jesus' purpose is clear. Jesus is the agent of good news – good news that is available to all, especially the unlikely. God is working in this world, even in places where it feels like nothing substantial ever happens.

In telling the people of Nazareth that the year of God's favor has begun, Jesus tells them that they have a part to play. The Jubilee is not a legend, not an impossibility, not some unimaginable tall tale. The Jubilee is real. And it will come about when people live with an urgent sense of love and care for others. The Jubilee will come about not when people pander to the comforts and predictability of this world, but rather, when they long for the possibilities of God's world.

Jesus says, "God's world begins today. And I'm getting started, right this very moment."

Upon leaving the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus follows his urgent message with a ministry of urgency. Jesus demonstrates this urgency with purposeful, intentional presence in his every action. Every conversation, every chance meeting, every prayer, every transaction reflects the reset of the Jubilee. Jesus does not keep score. He does not accrue interest. He does not submit to the powerful, nor seek to dominate the weak nor maintain the social status quo. He simply loves. Wholly, fully, consistently, urgently.

Jesus tells the people of Nazareth, "It starts today!"

But here's the thing. The words that Jesus spoke in Nazareth all those years ago are not fixed in time. When Jesus proclaims the year of the Jubilee, he proclaims it in every year and every time. Jesus is not just speaking to the people of Nazareth, he's speaking to you and me.

What is Luke's good news? Isaiah's words have been fulfilled. 2016, and every year, is the year of the Lord's favor.

But Sardis Baptist Church, the good news is only good, if we are willing to hear it, really hear it, and if we're willing to receive it, really receive it.

Each week we pray God's kingdom come. At least monthly we hear Micah's requirements for covenant-living. And not a day goes by when we don't laud Jesus for his lifestyle of love.

But do we attend to our prayer for God's kingdom with the same precision as we attend to our electronic bill pay? Do we approach loving kindness, and doing justice and walking humbly with the

same urgency as we do in following our diet, or going to the gym, or tracking our timesheets at work? Is the work of Jesus something we seek to admire or something we seek to emulate?

Friends, the Jubilee will not come about without our participation. It's gonna be hard. In fact, there may be days when we wished Jesus had decided not share this good news. This news calls us to faith, to trust that God's possibilities are bigger and deeper and better than the security of the privileges we cling to: our wealth, our health, our special status. The good news flings us into the same uncertainties of an unwed teenage mother raising a special child; of shepherds terrified by angels, of a prophet crying out in the wilderness, of twelve disciples obeying a command: "follow me."

But take heart. There's more good news: The one who proclaims the Jubilee, loved in a way that models our maker. And the love of our maker, equips us to be agents of the world that is coming. And what a world it will be!

Good news indeed! Amen.