

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside.¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

*¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,*

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:14-21)

Do You Understand Who this Is?

Did you go see President Obama when he was here last week? It was all over the news. They even closed the highway from Cobo Hall to the airport when he left. If you’re a fan – and even if you’re not – the president might seem like someone worth seeing. My great-grandfather once told me the story of how his father lifted him up onto his shoulders at the World’s Fair so that he could see President Teddy Roosevelt. He remembered that for the rest of his life. You might want your kids to remember seeing the president, too. In 1976, just before my great-grandfather died, my dad took me to see President Gerald Ford roll through the little town where we lived on the back of a train, greeting the crowd. Sadly, it was raining and my glasses were totally covered with water and all I remember is a blur and his voice on the loudspeaker thanking us for coming out. Now, when my great-grandfather saw Teddy Roosevelt, I don’t think he was even ten years old. But he was old enough to understand who he was seeing. I was old enough, too, to understand who was rolling through. While the crowd in Dowagiac, Michigan was nowhere near as large as the crowd at the World’s Fair, in both cases people turned out to see someone important. In our gospel lesson for today, the people of Nazareth turned out to see someone important. But they really didn’t understand who they were seeing. Do we? My friends, **do you understand who this is?**

I.

Of course, the answer is yes, right? You know very well that the person they came to see that day was Jesus. Yet, during this Epiphany season, we are celebrating the fact that we know, that God reveals him to us. **Do you understand who this is? Do you see your Savior?** We are rejoicing in the fact that you do.

That wasn’t true on that day in Nazareth that Luke records for us. This was very early in Jesus’ ministry. He was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River and then he went out and spent forty days in the desert facing temptation from the devil. When that was done, Jesus returned to Galilee, that northern part of Israel, **“in the power of the Spirit”** Luke says. Jesus settled in Capernaum, a fishing village not far from Nazareth. He began to preach and teach and very quickly, he became famous.

Only then did Jesus come home to Nazareth, the little town where he grew up, to preach in their synagogue. You can imagine that on the Saturday that he preached, the synagogue was pretty full. The local boy had become a celebrity. I’m sure they all wanted to hear him. When he stood up, they handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He found a very familiar text and read it to them. They knew it was a prophecy about the coming Messiah. Luke tells us that every eye was fixed on him. Then Jesus said something they never expected. He said, “This is about me!” I’ll bet you could’ve heard a pin drop in the synagogue at that moment. Jesus went to his hometown and read a prophecy of the coming Savior and then asked people who

had known him all his life to rethink everything they thought they knew about him. He was really asking them, “Do you understand what you have seen here in your hometown?”

What had they seen? Jesus probably moved to Nazareth when he was three or four years old. Joseph and Mary had grown up there, so he probably had extended family there. They had watched a little boy and his brothers and sisters grow. They knew his father, the carpenter and his mother. While they may have noticed that Jesus was a little different than most other boys, because he didn’t seem to get into much trouble, they probably weren’t paying close enough attention to realize that he never sinned. In fact, some of them may have remembered that time he went to Jerusalem for Passover and got lost for three days and wrongly concluded that he was just like any other boy. But of course, he was much more than that. He was the Son of God come in human flesh. He was the promised Savior. Jesus was challenging them to rethink a lifetime of assumptions about him.

How did he do that? By reminding them of what God had said about the coming Savior. Isaiah wrote, **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”** Ever since his baptism, the Spirit of the Lord had been on Jesus. God had anointed him in the Jordan River with the Holy Spirit himself. Why? So that he could preach the good news, so that he could announce the year of the Lord’s favor. My friends, this was the moment that all of their history had been working toward. This is what God had been doing since he first called Abraham and promised to make him into a great nation. This was the turning point in world history. After centuries of darkness – millennia in which the only believers were in a postage stamp size country on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea – now the whole world would discover God’s favor: his promised Messiah had come.

Did they recognize their Savior? Their whole history was about God sending his Son to die and rise and take their sins away. Did they see him when he came? Sadly, they did not. As we will hear next week, they rejected his testimony and refused to believe in him. But that didn’t change why he had come or what he was going to do over the next three years. He was going to reach out to them in every possible way with the gospel and then he was going to die and pay for them. He was going to pay for every sin they had ever committed, even their rejection of him. And he was going to do it while they were rejecting him. Then he was going to rise and send that message to them again and also to the whole world.

Do we understand how important this is? Of course, we do, right? We didn’t watch Jesus grow up. He watched us grow up. Most of us have known all our lives that Jesus is our Savior. I can ask the preschoolers what Jesus did for them, and they can tell me! Why do we get this when they didn’t? It’s not because we are any better, any more spiritual, any more righteous than they were. It’s because God gave us a gift, and nothing more. You see, every human being ever born – except for Jesus – was born a sinner. That means that our default setting is to trust in ourselves. We’re all heroes in our minds. God has to confront us with our sin and its consequences. Even when he does, we do our best to weasel out of it. God has to convict us with his law. So he built his power into his word to strike terror into our hearts. But he only does that because he wants us to understand that we’re sinking fast and then he throws us a lifeline. He tells us about Jesus. He built his power into the gospel and revealed our Savior to us. And he planted faith in our hearts through that message. This is the year of the Lord’s favor, the era when that gospel message is circling the earth bringing the elect to faith. For no other reason than his love, God gave us that faith. We now do see our Savior.

II.

But there still remains a practical question: what does that mean for my life? My friends, **Do you understand who this is? Do you apply his work to your life?** Isaiah said that God had anointed Jesus to preach the good news to the poor. In the Old Testament, poverty is often used as shorthand for people who are lacking more than just money. To be poor finally is to be suffering from sin. The good news in the strict sense is Jesus dying and rising and taking our sin away. But there is also a broader application of the gospel. It means all that God does for us out of love and grace. It means all that he promises us as we struggle through life in this sinful world. That’s really why it makes so much sense for the Old Testament to use the word “poor” to mean those who are suffering under their sins. Isaiah talks about all the practical blessings of having a Savior. Jesus quoted those words and said that God sent him **“to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed.”** Certainly, this means to be set free from slavery to sin and death and to have the blindness of unbelief replaced with faith and sight. But it also means more.

Think of everything that makes your life hard. Think of health problems and advancing age. Think of financial problems and family issues and the disappointments that we all have to deal with sooner or later. Think of all the things you see on the news that frustrate you and make you angry or just plain scare you. Why do all those things happen? Because of sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke this world. Now, none of it works the way God originally designed it to. The natural world brings earthquakes and famines and disease. Society is ripped apart by crime and prejudice and injustice. Government fails to respond to people's most basic needs. The economy runs on greed and the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Marriage begins in joy and yet so often ends in tears and sorrow. Families, as often as not today, are places of hurt and disappointment. God gave us all those things to be blessings to us and every one of them is broken by sin – the sins of Adam and Eve but also the sins we commit every day and the sins of the people we love and of the people we don't like and the sins of people we don't even know.

But Jesus came to solve the problem of sin. He died and he paid for your sins and mine, for the sins of the whole world, so he paid for all the sins of all the people we love who disappoint us and for all the sins of the people we can't get along with and even for all the sins of all the strangers out there who affect me with their sinning. He promises that the day is coming when he will wipe all sin out of this world forever. Jesus is going to return and remake this world and it will be the perfect place God designed it to be. So when you and I see things that make us weep or that make us angry or afraid, those are the things Jesus has promised to fix.

If we die before he comes back to do that, then we will join him in heaven. There he will wipe every tear from our eyes and all sin from our hearts, and we will truly be free. So, it's natural now for Christians to look forward to that day. As we get older, as we deal with more and more hurt, we long for Jesus to come again, or at least to take us home.

But even while we live here, Jesus makes all the difference in the world. He promises that if he died for us, he will never leave us. He won't let sin win and destroy our faith. He promises us that he will be with us to the very end of the age. No matter how alone you feel, no matter how beaten down you are, no matter how terrible your life gets, Jesus is always there beside you. He promises that he will comfort you when life hurts, that he will strengthen you to face the hard days. He promises that he will hear your prayers and rescue you from every evil of this life. So only those things touch you which he is going to use for your good. He promises that he will work through us when we show Christian love – when we teach our children, when we share the gospel, when we work to make our society a better place. When he makes those promises, he reaches into our hearts and strengthens our faith and makes us stand.

Knowing Jesus isn't something that matters only on Sunday morning. Understanding that man who stood up in the synagogue of his own home town and announced that he was the promised Savior means understanding God's purposes and plans for us in this life and in the life to come. Now, that doesn't mean we get everything he's doing. We can't read God's mind and know any more than what he tells us in his word. But what he tells us is that he is caring for us and he will do all that we need. And he will bring us home. Like my great-great-grandfather hoisting his son up onto his shoulders so he could see Teddy Roosevelt, today God lifts us up to see Jesus so that we know that our Savior loves us every day that we are here. Amen.