**Why is the Good News Good?**

**FBC Albemarle**

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Next year will mark 25years since I graduated high school. I’m not sure if there is going to be a 25th high school reunion for Lee County Senior High School class of ’92 but there was one for our 20th several years ago. I must admit I did not attend but through the magic of social media, I saw many pictures and posts by my high school friends and acquaintances.

As I scrolled through the pictures, many memories of high school flooded my mind. I remembered the Friday nights under the lights of the football stadium. I thought back to my athletic days of playing soccer, basketball and golf. I remembered how we tormented Dr. Underwood who tried to teach us AP European History. I thought about how hard I worked in Mr. Creighton’s physics class and how much fun I had as the yearbook editor. More than anything, I was interested in seeing how people looked and where in life they ended up. Let’s be truthful…especially within the first 30 after high school, we go back to high school reunions to see how people turned out in life. How did the starting quarterback and the captain of the cheerleaders turn out? Who took over their parent’s business? Who ended up living in New York City and making it big? Which nerd owns his own jet or which jock is now overweight and unemployed? Much of the conversations at the reunions start with “Can you believe…?” We compare, contrast and see if we measure up to where we all thought we would be at this point in life. This is why everyone gets anxious about their high school reunions.

Today’s text is the beginning of Jesus’ ministry according to Luke. He emerges from the wilderness having cleared his mind, strengthened his heart, and steadied himself in the purpose of his ministry here on earth. And the first place he wants to share this mission is his hometown of Nazareth. I understand this instinct in Jesus – wanting to share the excitement of a new call and hoping to extend an experience of blessing to those with whom you are closest. I can also sympathize with what happens on the other side of that sharing. I am sure many of my high school friends have wondered how in the world I ended being a pastor. Jesus did not go back to his “high school reunion” to boast but his friends and neighbors didn’t see it that way.

Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, ready to bring the good news to his family and friends. He was given Isaiah to read, a description of the Year of Jubilee: “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.”

This is the Good News. The Good News is for everyone but it is especially for the poor according to Luke. Those who are at the bottom of society are the Spirit’s chosen recipients of the Good News. As the Gospel of Luke unfolds the poor will be identified as worthy hearers of the Good News, as recipients of God’s kingdom (6:20), as a sign of Jesus’ ministry (7:22), and as invitees to the kingdom feast (14:13). The Good News that Jesus proclaims, and thus the Good News that we proclaim, must be Good News to everyone but especially to the poor, to the economically disadvantaged, and to the marginalized of our society.

We can almost hear his voice, speaking with such authority that it captivates the audience. But then he makes the shocking declaration: “Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This is where things start to go south! We might think that Jesus’ proclamation would be received as good news – the best news! Hasn’t Israel been waiting for just this announcement for the past several generations? Isn’t that the reason they are studying the words of the prophet, to ready their souls for the day the words become reality?

It is important that we put into context what Jesus was preaching to his hometown friends. Jesus was telling them that the year of the Lord’s favor has come to fruition through his life. Israel took the practice of Sabbath very seriously. Not only did they practice the Sabbath weekly, they also observed the Sabbath year every 7years. During the Sabbath year, they would allow their land to rest by not using it for agricultural reasons, allowing it to restore its nutrients. In addition, after seven cycles, equaling 49 years, they would designate the 50th year as the Year of Jubilee or the year of the Lord’s favor. During the Year of Jubilee, all of Israel was charged to return to what they were given originally. If they had acquired land during the 49 years, they were to give it back to the original owners. Due to financial reasons, if some Israelites had become slaves of other Israelites, then their debts were to be forgiven and given their freedom. All of these things were to be done because the Israelites realized that everything they have belonged to God. It was God who brought them out of slavery and into the Promised Land. It always belonged to God.

So by Jesus proclaiming that he was the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, he was telling the Jews that he was going to return all things as it was intended. Jesus was telling them their wait was over. What they had been praying for had arrived. All they had to do was receive the message; release their old ideas of who they are, and live into God’s dream for them. This will happen not because they’ve worked so hard for it, or planned for it, or even suffered for it. It will come as a result of God’s grace pouring in, transforming everything. It will not be brought to them through a return of King David or a series of plagues, which will decimate Rome. It comes through the voice of someone just like them, a carpenter’s son who tells them miracles are an everyday possibility. It’s so unexpected, so different from what they thought, not only are they prevented from receiving it; they actually experience it as a threat. “We know this kid – isn’t he Joseph’s son? What does he know? How can he be our savior?”

 So what kind of vision do we hear in Jesus’ address? It is an announcement of his mission. It is a description of the kingdom of God. It is a promise of God’s aid and presence. And all of this and more is summarized by the words *good news*: “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.”

What is striking, if you listen closely, is that this good news is only good if you are willing to admit what is hard in your life, what is lacking, what has been most difficult. It is not “good news” in general, but rather good news *for the poor*. It is not just release, but release to those *who are captive*, sight to those *who are blind*, freedom to those *who are oppressed*.

Do you see what I mean? God offers words of comfort, but such words only mean something to those living with discomfort.

How do you think we hear those words today? We spend so much time acting as if we have it all together. We spend so much money trying to look better, get fitter, appear younger. There is so much pressure on us externally from the culture at large and internally from ourselves to not need anything or anyone that it makes you wonder if Jesus’ message has any value or can find any purchase among today’s listeners.

Except for one thing: the stories we tell ourselves about being perfect, the commercials we pay attention to telling us that we really can have it all, the ads that promise us that if we just purchase this product we’ll never feel insecure again – these are all false. And deep down we know it.

So while Jesus’ message is good news, in order for us to hear it that way it must first strike us as bad news, the bad news that that we are not who we want to be, can be, and should be…and we never will be. Jesus comes bringing good news to those in need, and those who don’t see and admit their need want nothing to do with him. But when we can admit that need, when we can be honest about our deep hurts, fears, and longings, we can accept the Good News of Jesus. The Good News is GOOD because it is for you and me. We are broken, bound in sin and oppressed by what we think we ought to be. However, it is Christ who came to set us free, to give us sight and to release us from our sinfulness. In him, we are in perpetual Jubilee!