

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

January 23, 2022 –EPIPHANY 3, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*A Jubilee for Our Souls*”*

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 (The Israelites hear the Word of God and rejoice)
Psalm 19 (The heavens declare God’s glory; His law is perfect)
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a (We are members of one Body—Christ)
St. Luke 4:14-21 (Jesus prophesies about His transformative ministry)

An elderly couple was walking out of church one Sunday. The wife commented to her husband, “Did you see the strange hat Mrs. O’Brien was wearing?” “No, I didn’t,” he replied. Then she observed, “Bill Smith badly needs a haircut, doesn’t he?” “Sorry, I didn’t notice,” answered her husband. “You know,” said the wife impatiently, “sometimes I wonder if you get anything at all out of going to church.”

We each get something different out of going to church, depending on what we expect to experience when we come here. For example, in today’s Gospel lesson, one might ask, “What did those attending the synagogue in Nazareth expect to get out of that service?” Certainly they did not expect to see their old neighbor, Jesus, stand and read from the Scroll of the Prophet Isaiah, let alone comment on the Holy text, even though His eight-word sermon was both the shortest on record and a guaranteed bombshell: “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Whaat? The prophet’s words about the coming Messiah, the One for whom the Jewish people had been waiting and longing for thousands of years, *had just come true*, right there in their own little synagogue?! Did this mean Jesus was the long-promised Savior, the Anointed One sent by God to redeem His people? In the verse that follows Jesus’ explosive revelation, which is not in today’s lectionary lesson, St. Luke writes: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. ‘Isn’t this Joseph’s son?’ they asked.”

Ah, but Jesus didn’t stop there. In His commentary on His sermon, He talked about how He came not only for the Jews, but also the Gentiles—those people the Israelites thought of as unworthy, unclean, uneducated, uninvited, and many other “uns.” By the time Jesus finished, verses 28-29 read: “All the people in the synagogue were *furious* when they heard this. 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” (*italics added*).

Wow! I mean, I’m sure there are Sundays when some of you don’t particularly care for my preaching, but this is certainly an extreme reaction to an unpopular message. Why were Jesus’ fellow synagogue members so upset with Him? They felt *betrayed*. Their pride at thinking they were the only people who were special to God was threatened by Jesus’ inclusive love for all people, no matter who they are.

St. Luke locates this story near the start of Jesus’ ministry because it leads directly to the heart of the Gospel message. For, throughout Luke’s accounts of Jesus as the Savior of the World, the evangelist emphasizes Christ’s openness to the Gentiles.

Isaiah’s commission as read by Jesus is similar to the Great Commission that appears at the end of Matthew’s Gospel; namely, to proclaim the Good News; bring release to the captives; restore sight to the blind; and free the oppressed—no matter who they are. This prophecy set Christ’s agenda, and because we are His followers, it is still our commission and agenda today.

Jesus’ ministry involved loving the unloved and serving the undeserving. He wants us to do the same, especially because human need has both physical and spiritual dimensions. When the poor hear the Good News, when captives are set free, and when the oppressed are liberated, God is working in their lives revealing His power and His glory, and He calls us to be part of that exciting mission.

Jesus of Nazareth knew exactly what the people needed to hear that day, and He knew exactly what He wanted to share with them. All who were in that synagogue—along with us here today—were the *spiritually* poor, hungry, oppressed, imprisoned, and blind. For Christ looks beyond our outward appearances to the very core of our souls.

He came to proclaim to them, and to all of us, a Jubilee for our souls. The Biblical Jubilee was held every 50 years, and at that time, fields were allowed to rest; families returned to their ancestral homelands; debts were cancelled; and slaves were set free. The people felt that the inequality and injustice that inevitably increased over the years had to be leveled every half-century. So the Old Testament custom of Jubilee enabled each family and community to start afresh. In the same way, Jesus' "Jubilee" makes it possible for us to have a fresh start in *our* lives, through faith in Him.¹

When we accept Jesus into our hearts, Jubilee becomes a life-long season. Christ came to set the captives free, and to proclaim to us the Jubilee. Lest *we* think we don't need liberating, *every one of us* is captive to *something*, whether it's overwork, television, the Internet, our smart phones, food we shouldn't eat, an unhealthy relationship, private sin, or a hidden addiction. Jesus frees us to avail ourselves of the Holy Spirit's power and presence so that He can inspire, enliven, and transform us, even as He also soothes, comforts, and guides us.

When Jesus read the Scriptures in the synagogue that day, He announced a "Jubilee," that is, a remission of sin *debts*. Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer reads, "Forgive us our debts, for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us." Because of this, Ephesians 4:32 reminds us: "be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."

This points to our standard for treating one another that is found in Jesus' words from Matthew 25:40, "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for Me." And the proof of our transformation as believers is that we can embrace and welcome "the least of these" in our community, and in our world, realizing that this also includes each and every one of us.

Jesus' words in the synagogue are words of hope and inspiration for the oppressed, the hopeless, and the discouraged, in all circumstances. That is why we can be certain that it is Christ's will for us to reach out and help the less fortunate and all who suffer—whether they are physically poor or spiritually impoverished. That is why our mission at St. John's Church is to continue to build a caring community of faith.

Caring for people was Jesus' primary concern, and it must remain our primary concern. As we heard last Sunday, God's Holy Spirit has given each of us at least one gift for serving others. Or, as the late President John F. Kennedy was reported to have said, "One person can make a difference and everyone should try."

Granted, there are times when we feel besieged by the needs of others, and we're not sure whether or not we *should* help them. What if it's a stranger who's just shown up at our door, claiming all sorts of hardships—most of which sound fishy—and asking for money? Or, what if we're being pressured by a codependent family member, whom to assist would only result in enabling what isn't best for that individual? We may have a neighbor who suffers from what psychologists call "learned helplessness." That is, the person could perfectly well do for his- or herself, but derives greater emotional gratification from being taken care of and waited on.

What to do for whom, when, and how much, should always be a matter of prayerful discernment—the type of discernment Jesus modeled for us that was founded on both His extensive knowledge of Holy Scripture and His close and abiding relationship with God. In such situations, "What would Jesus do?" might be a good question to ponder.

If you accept what Jesus preached that day long ago, then I invite you, in the coming weeks and months, to reflect on and pray about how His revelation—"Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"—truly impacts your life, your decisions, your choices, and your relationships, especially with those whom God considers "the least among us."

May the Lord give us ears to hear what He wants us to do, and His Holy Spirit grant us the grace to obey. *Amen.*

¹ Adapt. N. George-Hacker, "Jesus Gives us a Jubilee for our Souls," 24 January 2016, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

² Adapt. Craig Condon, "Words and Their Meaning," *Sermons From My Heart*, 25 May 2012, <<http://sermonsfrommyheart.blogspot.com/2012/05/luke-414-21-words-and-their-meaning.html>> 20 January 2016. Used with permission.