

Series: Embracing the Familiar
Sermon: As Was His Custom
Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

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Rev. Karen H Roberts

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18 "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, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In our worship, God is glorified...Christ is exalted. So, it is easy for us to forget that Jesus was also a hometown boy. He didn't just get dropped onto the earth to bring love and salvation, he was born into it. He had a momma who gave birth to him and loved him. He had classmates, and who knows if he was popular and all the girls wanted to date him or if he was picked on and bullied. He had neighbors who watched him grow up, who maybe hired him to help with odd jobs around their houses. And he had a community of faithful Jews who celebrated with him all the major milestones of his transition to adulthood...people he saw each week at synagogue, as was his custom.

Those are four big words for us to consider. Jesus didn't just get dropped here to fulfill God's plan...he grew into the plan from infancy...from a faithful mother who took him to synagogue, and on religious pilgrimages to Jerusalem...from mentors and teachers who, each week, taught him scripture and how to understand it...and let's face it, we need the help of others sometimes to understand what the Word is saying to us. Our faith grows, or is shaped, by the community around us. If Jesus grew up in the south we would say, "He had good people, they always went to church and they raised him right."

So, we can imagine the sense of familiarity and simultaneous joy when Jesus shows up at his hometown synagogue. It was his custom to be there, people were not surprised by his presence, but he had been away for a while, so there was joy that he was back...things were familiar again. Of course they invited him, as was his custom, to do a scripture reading and offer a moment of teaching...because he had done so before apparently...and they handed him the scroll of Isaiah where he then searched for just the right verses. So, He stands and reads:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me:

We might remember that when Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit came upon him. If we continue reading, we would see that the Spirit then sent Jesus into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. The temptations were such that they helped Jesus to wrestle with the kind of Messiah he was going to be. Sometimes struggle and adversity provides clarity. I think this was the case for Jesus.

Before he goes into the world to save the world, he has to figure out his mission, his priorities, his action plan. Would he be self-serving? Turning stones into bread just because he got hungry? Would he be power driven? Using any means necessary to gain the world? Would he be content to use

God's power for his own safety and give no care to the safety of others? No. In the end, the answer was no. Jesus came for the people...not to serve himself.

So, the spirit then sent him home, to the synagogue, as was his custom to proclaim what he has just figured out...the kind of Messiah he was going to be...the kind of priorities he would have for his ministry...the way he would live out his calling. He went home to tell all those people familiar with him, who he was and what he was about to do...and he knew just where to find it. In Isaiah 61.

Jesus is saying, God has anointed me (set me apart) to do the very things Isaiah had promised:

God has sent Jesus to bring Good news to the poor: What is good news to the poor? Maybe that they will be fed. That Jesus didn't turn stones to bread and fulfill his own hunger, but that Jesus will turn himself into bread in order to feed others. His body, given for you...take, eat.

Maybe good news is when he stands on a mount and proclaims: Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven - an invitation to be loved and welcomed into God's presence, rather than ignored or cast out because you are poor and hold no power.

Maybe it is that Jesus will carry out his ministry helping the world to notice the poor, like when he fed the hungry multitudes after the disciples had just wanted to send them away to fend for themselves.

Maybe the good news to the poor is the promise that we will see them and work to help them, like Jesus did.

God has also sent Jesus to proclaim release to the captives: We see this time and again in Jesus' ministry, setting people free from the things that are holding them down. He frees people from the shame, from their sin, from the societal expectations that limit their compassion. Think about the story of the Good Samaritan - in that story a man is freed from fear and prejudice so that he can help a foreign stranger and save him. Jesus says this foreigner is the neighbor we are all called to love and care for, even if the world around us says, that is no concern to us. Jesus frees us to do the good and holy thing, always, because when we are no longer interested in the liberation and freedom of others, we have lost sight of Jesus' mission, and the church's purpose.

God has sent Jesus for the recovery of sight to the blind: And while that may be a literal calling, to be a healing presence in the world, if we look at the original Isaiah text, the Hebrew reads "bind up the brokenhearted," instead of the Greek translation of recovery of sight. So perhaps recover of sight to the blind is also a symbolic way of saying, Jesus came to open our eyes to God's love and hope in the world. We will not lose hope from our place in the darkness or that we will be the light in someone else's darkness.

It could be a to open our eyes to the brokenness around us and be the caring, compassionate, Christlike presence that brings comfort.

Jesus also knew God sent him to let the oppressed go free: We remember him healing men and women whose illnesses limited their social acceptance. But we can go further and remember that while the Jewish people were oppressed by Rome, Jesus indicates that their freedom from oppression is not found in war or rebellion or political maneuvering but, instead, their freedom

comes in following God's will. It is more about how we treat each other – whether we empower or oppress.

Jesus always modeled empowerment. He set people free so that they might go live abundantly.

Finally, God has sent Jesus to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Here, Isaiah builds from Leviticus which teaches the year of Lord's favor, sometimes called the year of Jubilee, is not a literal year but a concept in which an opportunity for renewal is extended to people. It is a period of restoration and redemption. However, it wasn't just about personal forgiveness and redemption, it was about societal forgiveness and redemption as well.

For example, in those days, when someone began to struggle with poverty and debt, they might have their land, their homes, taken because they can't pay a debt. Kind of like foreclosure. They might lose everything. But when a year of Jubilee is called, debts are canceled and through this debt forgiveness, homes/land are returned to the original owner, as if the debt has been paid in full. People who have had to enter indentured servanthood are released. Everyone gets a new chance to start over. It is a year of redemption and forgiveness that does all the things Jesus has said he is anointed to do: it helps the poor, released the captives, frees the oppressed, and heals those who have been blind to the suffering of others or, for some, blind to a way out of their suffering.

A societal debt forgiveness plan that allows for equity and justice and renewal. Can you imagine the comfort for the poor that someday they could recover what was lost. That their pain wouldn't last forever?

Can you imagine the joy of recognizing God's grace and forgiveness in the tangible ways your neighbors offer life-giving and compassionate opportunities to thrive?

These words from Isaiah are Jesus' mission statement. It tells us who he is and what he came to do. And we are able to see that his clarity came to him in the wilderness...where Satan tempted him, and he found strength to resist. Do you remember where he found that strength? From scripture. Jesus quoted scripture to withstand temptation...scripture he learned when growing up in his small town, going to synagogue, reading...learning to interpret...learning to live out what he heard...as was his custom.

Where do our customs come from? Where are our behaviors rooted? Not just personally, but communally? Societally? Culturally? If we, friends, lose our ability to live out the scriptures we read and work to understand...if we fail to show grace, grant mercy, embrace compassion, and empower abundant life for all people...we have lost the mission of Jesus...we have lost the purpose of the church...we have lost the origins of our humanity, being made in the image of God.

We are called to be Christ-like – to live as was his custom – truth based in scripture and lived out in mercy. May we go and do likewise.

Let us pray...

Holy and merciful God,

The world offers us a multitude of temptations,

We are encouraged to put ourselves first, to shame those who struggle, to revere power and reject the powerless. We are encouraged to dehumanize our neighbors and adopt a way of life that segregates and oppresses.

But you call us to live differently. You offer us freedom to look at each other and recognize God there. You teach us that it is the last who is first, that the poor are to be cared for and lifted up and the powerful held accountable and brought lower. You teach us about equity and justice based on our humanness, not our wealth or nationality or gender.

It is not easy to withstand the temptation to go along with the world, but grant us the power to choose instead to go along with your word and to find solutions that are just and merciful to all people. We pray this in the name of our merciful Christ. Amen.