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“Inaugural Events”
Luke 4: 14-21
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We are now in the season of Epiphany. The season has the same bookends every year. It starts with the same two stories every year: the story of the Magi visiting the Christ child and offering their gifts, and then the story of Christ being baptized. The season of Epiphany always ends with the Transfiguration – that’s the story of Jesus going up the mountain with Peter, James and John, and then suddenly the robe Jesus is wearing is like a gown at the Golden Globes, very sparkly and flashy, probably less revealing, and the voice from the baptism returns, “This is my Son, my beloved, listen to him.”

In all three of those stories, something new is revealed, perspectives change. God is revealed in an unexpected way. The Magi are surprised to see God in the Christ child. The Spirit is revealed at Jesus’ baptism, and it empowers him. And at the Transfiguration, the disciples see the power and presence of God where they didn’t before, in Jesus who has been walking around with them this whole time.

In the Sundays between Epiphany/baptism and the transfiguration, we start telling the stories of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. But as we tell these stories, we are also to be expecting something new to be revealed about God, the Christian faith, our lives. We should expect our perspectives to change.

So, Jesus grows up in Nazareth, becomes an adult, and then he leaves home. Poor Mary, having to watch her baby leave the nest. He goes to the Jordan River to see what all the hubbub surrounding John the Baptist is about. He hangs out there for a while. He's baptized, the Spirit descends upon him and then drives him into the wilderness. He's tempted in the wilderness for 40 days, and then he starts to teach in the synagogues in Galilee. Eventually he ends up back home, in the synagogue in Nazareth. But he's a different guy. He's back from college, back from studying abroad, he's started his work. And he opens the scroll of Isaiah and reads and begins to preach.

Scholars often call this story the inaugural sermon of Jesus which is interesting since we have an inauguration happening tomorrow. Tomorrow we'll be listening to Barack Obama's speech for clues about the agenda of his second term, and in a similar way this story tells us about Jesus' agenda as he lives out the few years of his ministry.

Christian faith is extremely personal. It proclaims God's never ending love for the world and God's never ending love for us as individuals, no matter who we are or what we've done. Accepting this love and internalizing this unconditional love, changes everything. This changes lives, it's changed my life and is changing my life. But Christianity is also about the biggest issues, the issues that affect all of us together. And it's the biggest issues, the systemic issues, the social issues that Jesus talks about as he begins his ministry.

Jesus unrolls the scroll from Isaiah and reads, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, (that just happened at the baptism) because he has anointed me (Messiah means anointed one – kings were anointed like Presidents are sworn in). The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me as Messiah to do what? To bring good news to the poor. God 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. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. "This is what I'm going to be doing," Jesus says. "This is my agenda, this is what my ministry is about."

It's interesting to note what isn't in this agenda of Jesus. There's nothing about original sin here. There's nothing about a fallen humanity that needs to be redeemed in the eyes of a God who has been holding a grudge since the Garden of Eden. There's nothing about individual sin here, about people who have been bad who need to be forgiven. There's only compassion. There's only compassion for the broken and aching, unjust circumstances that people find themselves in, no matter what the cause. And there's a determination to deliver us from all that keeps us from life. And, if we know what the last line means, we see that there's a direct challenge here to the systemic issues that are oppressing the people. God has a different vision for how the world should be, and God has anointed Jesus to proclaim this vision, to live this vision, and to create a community that will embody this vision throughout time.

The last line of Jesus inaugural sermon is "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." That's another way of saying proclaiming the year of Jubilee.

Jubilee comes from the book of Leviticus, one of the best books of the Bible, I promise. In Leviticus chapter 25 God commands that every seven years there will be a year of Sabbath for the land. There's care for creation, the land is a living thing. You can't use it forever, on a regular basis you have to let it rest. Then you count off seven weeks of seven years and in the next year, the 50th year, Leviticus 25 says you blow a ram's horn and proclaim liberty or freedom throughout the land. Leviticus 25: 10 reads, "It shall be a jubilee for you, you shall return every one of you to your property and every one of you to your family."

In ancient Israel, indebtedness, slavery, a few people holding an increasing amount of wealth and the poor being on the edge of survival was a problem. As a peasant you borrowed

money from wealthy individuals to plant your crop, use land, etc. And if you had some bad years and couldn't pay, you sold whatever you could to pay your debt. You sold your land and you sold your family members into slavery. In the Jubilee year, slaves were freed, returned to their families. And in the Jubilee year, you got your land back from the wealthy landowner, all previous leases on farmland were terminated and you got the family farm back.

This law is not only good news for the poor, it creates a completely different world. It guards against the concentration of wealth, by giving those who have lost everything, some wealth to start over with. Mary's song the Magnificat in the first chapter of Luke says, "God has filled the poor with good things and sent the rich away empty." This makes sense if the good news of the Realm of God looks something like Jubilee, which is what Jesus is saying. If you were the wealthy landowner in the town and you were growing your business by buying people out and accumulating more slaves so you could turn a profit on more land, to have to give land away and slaves away was to have to give your wealth back. Every fifty years jubilee is a progressive tax code on steroids. The estate tax is child's play compared to Jubilee.

So that's why Jesus is good news to the poor. That's why Jesus is about letting the oppressed go free. We also might realize that this is why people want to kill him. God's vision for a redeemed and restored world, has economic and political implications. God's vision of a redeemed and restored world is absolutely beautiful, and it's incredibly challenging. There's something about this that's extreme, that's more than we bargained for.

This week I reread Martin Luther King's "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." It was written April 16 1963, four months before the "I Have a Dream" speech was delivered. King was in Birmingham and was arrested for the non-violent protests he participated in and a handful of local religious leaders, pastors, bishops and a rabbi, published a letter criticizing King's efforts as

unwise and untimely. King responds with this lengthy letter from jail. The letter both inspires me and haunts me. It haunts me because I can identify with the religious leaders who are criticizing him, leaders who are afraid of conflict, leaders who are afraid of the consequences of telling the truth and doing what is right, leaders who are afraid of people who are different than them and the people who are the same as them. This letter also inspires me because in his honesty King identifies who we are called to be as a church and as individuals. Kings speaks of a bold Christianity that comes from the bold vision of the Realm of God that Jesus shares in Nazareth. I've been thinking about two excerpts from this letter, and I'll share them with you.

He writes,

There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion, it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being “disturbers of the peace” and “outside agitators.” ... Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent – and often even vocal –sanction of things as they are.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist...but as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus as extremist for love: “Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you.” Was not Amos an extremist for justice: “Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: “I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus.” Was not Martin Luther an extremist: “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God.” And John Bunyan: “I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience.” And Abraham Lincoln: “This nation cannot survive half slave and half free.” And Thomas Jefferson: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal...”

So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of extremists.

King and the inaugural sermon in Nazareth remind us that we are to be a bold community, a bold people. As Christians we've seen a different world. We've seen a world where everyone is valuable, every created thing is sacred, and everyone has enough. When we give ourselves to that world, pledge to live in that world, it becomes difficult to tolerate injustice anymore, it becomes difficult to tolerate brokenness anymore, it becomes difficult to tolerate all that holds us in bondage, and bold things start to happen. This isn't something added on to the faith, this is the heart of what it means to follow Jesus. We're the recipients of God's powerful love, and we take powerful love with us into the world, every week, every day. We're Christians. Amen.