

8-23-09 sermon Prophets in Our Hometown:
Our Purpose as a Congregation in Annville

Luke 4:14-30

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Those who have been here every Sunday this month will know that we are in the midst of a series of sermons about the purpose of the church, with the intention of preparing us for our Brunch Meeting this coming Saturday to discern together our purpose as a congregation in this particular community at this particular time in our life together as God's people. But for those who have been away part of the time or for those who haven't been paying attention – this is the fourth and final sermon in this series. We have talked about the church as the Body of Christ, the earthly body through whom Jesus wants to live and work today; we have talked about the church's purpose in doing Christ's work of redeeming Creation; we have talked about the Brethren emphasis of calling people to totally immerse themselves in following Jesus; and today we talk about what it means to be a congregation in this community – to be the ones through whom God is at work in Annville and in Lebanon County.

The video clips were great! I'm glad so many of you have been thinking about what God might want to do through our congregation in this county. Fred and I talked about not wanting us to be overwhelmed by all the possibilities, not to feel burdened, but to be made alert, aware, prayerfully attentive to the fact that the Lord does want to be at work through us and will empower us to carry out God's purposes.

It is interesting to note that often the needs we perceive out in the community are the parts of life most important to us: those who like to work with their hands see the need to build homes; those who have worked with financial matters see the need to help people become more stable in their own finances; those who have worked with kids see more kids out there who need the love and care of a church family like ours. This is part of what it means to be the various parts of the Body of Christ – each of us making use of God-given gifts and inclinations to do our part in getting God's work done in the world – the work of redeeming lives and living out Christ's love, preparing for the Kingdom of God. It is important that we make a conscious effort to let God work through us in our own hometown.

Our scripture today tells about Jesus going into his home area, making clear the purpose of his life among his neighbors and friends at the very start of his ministry. Jesus had just weathered the temptations in the wilderness and now was moving

through Galilee – the area in which he had been raised, sort of like Lebanon County would be for many of us. And news about Jesus was spreading through the countryside. Everyone was praising his teaching, proud to have such a fine young man whom they could call *“one of their own.”*

So it was that Jesus came to Nazareth, his hometown, where he had been raised. And he went to the synagogue and stood up to read. Evidently he volunteered. So they gave him the scroll of Isaiah’s prophecies, and he found the place where words of promise and hope are recorded, which had first been spoken to the Jews who languished in Captivity in Babylon, yearning to go back to their beloved homeland. And Jesus, who had come out of the wilderness in the power of the Spirit, read Isaiah’s words: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon 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.”* And he sat down – which is what teachers of that day did when they were going to get down to the serious business of teaching important stuff – and Jesus sat down and began to teach his friends and neighbors by saying, *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* In other words – this Good News is in process of happening! Indeed, it is the very purpose of my life.

Do you think you could find the place in the Bible that declares your purpose? It is important to become familiar enough with the scriptures that you can turn to the passage you are looking for, as Jesus did. I suggest that you bring your Bible with you to church and keep it open during the Bible studies of S.S. and the preaching of worship, and whenever you hear something that is God’s voice speaking to you – mark it! Make some kind of notation that will help you find that passage again and again – as you work at discerning the purpose of your life, what God wants you to do.

Jesus turned to that part of the scroll of Isaiah and said, in effect, *this is what God is up to – the Lord has sent his Spirit upon me to get the Good News spoken to poor people.* That’s the first thing. Are you aware that hundreds of scriptures express God’s concern for the poor? When the widest spectrum of church leaders in the United States got together in Christian Churches Together the past 9 years, poverty was the one issue we could all agree that we must work on together. The scriptures are clear – this is at the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ – that when the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, we are to do something good for the poor among us! And this is the first thing that Jesus declares when he speaks to his hometown about

his purpose as he starts his ministry. *“The Spirit of the Lord ... has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”*

Secondly, the Spirit of the Lord, Jesus said, anoints him (and us) *“to proclaim freedom for prisoners”* – just like Moses going to Pharaoh and saying, *“Let God’s people go!”* – so Jesus comes to set people free from the powers of sin and death, from captivities of all sorts. Jesus seems to want to emphasize this because in the middle of reading from Isaiah 62, he inserts a phrase from Isaiah 58:6, no longer to merely proclaim that those in prison shall be free, but to get involved in actually making it happen, as he quotes from Isaiah 58: *“to release the oppressed”!* And the very next event in Luke’s Gospel after today’s reading describes how Jesus went to Capernaum and drove an evil spirit out a demon-possessed man. Jesus did not just say that God *wants* eventually to get people set free. No, Jesus set people free! Jesus set you and me free, right?! That’s his purpose. That’s God’s purpose for his life. He read it in the Scriptures, and the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to carry it out.

What about you? What about me? What is our purpose? What do we read in the Scriptures?

Jesus wasn’t finished. His purpose also includes proclaiming *“recovery of sight for the blind.”* And not just for physical eyes, but for inward eyes as well, as Jesus helped people begin to see what life is all about, what God’s desires are for us. As John Newton wrote in those words we often sing by rote, but can find tears in our eyes when we think deeply about what they truly mean: *“I was once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.” Amazing Grace!*

And finally, Jesus concludes his reading from Isaiah 62 by saying, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me *“to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* This is a reference to the Jubilee Year required by Leviticus 25 – a time when all debts are to be forgiven and everyone is to be set free, when life begins afresh, starting all over again. It is the wonderful, refreshing Good News that Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels record as Jesus first words after coming out of the temptations in the wilderness: *“The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News!”* (Mark 1:14; cf. Matthew 4:14). God is ready to be at work with you – now you, make yourself ready to be at work for God.

So far, so good. The people of Nazareth speak well of him. *“Isn’t this Joseph’s son?”* One of our own! And *“they were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.”* Until Jesus began to speak further. He knew they wanted him to do miracles among them, just as they had heard he had done in Capernaum. But, Jesus said, you have to remember that the prophets Elijah and Elisha were sent by God to bring healing and hope to their enemies instead of to their own people. Indeed, the widows of the home country were not the ones who were helped by Elijah in the time of famine; instead it was the widow of Zarephath in Phoenicia. To understand why that brought consternation, you have to know that the relatives and friends of Jesus in his home town believed that they were God’s chosen people, and it seemed sacrilegious to them that Jesus would say God would choose to bless a foreigner instead of them. It was even worse when he reminded them of how God healed the leprosy of Naaman the Syrian, a military leader of an enemy army – not only healing their enemy, but doing so without doing the same for the lepers of Israel.

It would be like telling a story about a Taliban war hero being healed by God from a terrible disease while American troops are dying of that same disease. The people were furious at Jesus. They could no longer perceive him as a wise teacher. Their prejudices blurred their vision, and they drove Jesus out of town to a cliff where they were prepared to hurl him to his death. But, Luke records, Jesus *“walked right through the crowd and went on his way.”*

When you are clear about your purpose, when you know what it is that God wants you to do, you are made able to carry on, even when the people who have known you the best – even when your own hometown friends think you are off your rocker.

Jesus was clear about the power of God to reach beyond the walls of enmity and hatred that this world continually builds. Jesus was clear about God’s desire to heal and redeem anyone who repents ... who turns away from sin and opens up to the Way of the Lord for his/her life. Are you turning from all sin? Are you ready for God’s purposes to get carried out in your life?

Too often we play church. We smile and say, *“oh, isn’t that interesting?”* or *“well, that gives me something to think about!”* or *“someday someone will just have to do something about that.”* Jesus says, *The time is at hand! Repent! Now! All of you! Believe the Gospel! The Good News is bursting upon us! Let it work its miracle in you, in your neighborhood. Today!*

Barbara Brown Taylor (“Miracle on the Beach,” *Home By Another Way*, Boston: Cowley, 1999, p. 38) writes: *“What we have lost ... is a full sense of the power of God – to recruit people who have made terrible choices; to invade the most hopeless lives and fill them with light; to sneak up on people who are thinking about lunch, not God, and smack them upside the head with glory.”*

We are like the disciples on the day of the Transfiguration when they saw the glory of God in Jesus – they wanted to build shelters to hold that glory in. So often we want to hold the glory for ourselves, here in our sanctuary, so that we can come to ooh and aah over how wonderful God is. But we fail the Lord when we do not get that glory out to bless everyone around us! Too often we think in terms of blessing our own people and forget about all the other people around us.

Newspapers some years ago told about a reporter in Kosovo in the midst of terrible warfare who was approached by a man holding a child badly injured by a bomb blast. *“You have a car. Please help me get this little girl to the hospital.”* It was dangerous, but they drove, as the man said, *“Please drive faster, my little girl is still living ... Please get there soon, my girl is still breathing ... Please hurry, her skin is still warm.”* But when they arrived, it was too late. The girl had died. They were hit hard. *“Now comes the hard part,”* the man confided. *“I must find her father and tell him.”* *“But I thought you were her father. I thought she was your child!”* said the reporter. And the man replied, *“Aren’t they all our children?”*

Until it is clear to us that God loves all of God’s children, wherever they may be, whatever they may have been taught thus far ... until it is our very nature to pay attention to each person as a precious child of God, we will miss the heartbeat of purpose to which God calls us, the very reason for sending his Spirit upon us ... to declare Good News to the poor, freedom for prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, releasing the oppressed, proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favor – this year, here and now, in this place, in our own hometown.

Brother Jim Martin, what you said in the video has come to my mind as I wrote this sermon – that we should open our eyes to really see the neighbors around us and what’s going on in their lives, in order to be alert to what God wants to do through us in our community. That’s not the same thing as asking them to tell us what they think we should be doing. Our guidance should come from the Lord, not from

scratching all the places that people tell us they itch. Sometimes it might even be our job to create some new itches for the people around us. But we would do well – especially this week, as we prepare to discern what our purpose is in the context of this community of Annville and Lebanon County – we would do well to pay attention to the people around us, asking, as the Sesame Street song goes, *“Oh, who are the people in our neighborhood, in our neighborhood, in our neighborhood; oh, who are the people in our neighborhood, the people that we meet each day?”*

One final story. A seasoned pastor was driving through the Scottish countryside with a new graduate from seminary whom he was to mentor. The new graduate had a fascinating history – David had been a shepherd for 20 years before a dramatic conversion had led him to train for the ministry. As they drove to a little rural church, David suddenly asked the pastor to stop the car. He got out, climbed over a stone wall into a field where dozens of sheep were grazing, and walked to the far end of the pasture. A distressed sheep was stuck on its back, and he gently shoved it upright so that it could scramble away. Back in the car, David explained that unshorn sheep are so top-heavy that they can get stuck on their backs and suffocate. Unless they are set right, they will die.

“David and I had seen the same field,” the pastor mused later. *“I had admired its pastoral beauty. He had seen the one sheep out of a hundred that was in danger. He viewed the sheep with the experienced eyes of a shepherd. I viewed them with the eyes of a lifelong city-dweller. Without his sight and his touch, the sheep would have soon died. All around us are people whose distress we may not be able to see. Often it's carefully hidden. God would give us the gift of his sight, so that we can stop, climb over the walls that divide us, gently touch others and help them to their feet.”* (Tim Dearborn, *Taste & See; Awakening Our Spiritual Senses* [Downers Grove: Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1996], 131.)

Jesus had eyes to see. The Spirit of the Lord was upon him. His hometown friends did not want to look to see how God might want to be at work with certain people, people they preferred to reject. But that didn't keep Jesus from doing what God sent him into this world to do. He did not come to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Now ... what is our purpose in our hometown?

Hymn 226 *You are Salt for the Earth*