

Jesus' State of the Union

Luke 4:14-21

January 27 2019

The summer that I turned twenty-two,
I got a call from the minister of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Charlottesville,
Virginia.

My hometown church.

He was calling to invite me to guest preach one Sunday that summer.

This was definitely a leap of faith on his part —

I had had one year of seminary at that point,

and during that one year I had preached exactly once — to my preaching class.

But God bless him, the Rev. Bill Smith offered me his pulpit,

and I said yes, and as soon as I hung up the phone

I realized what I had just said yes to, and I just about passed out.

Waves of nausea hit me.

This was my home church, for heaven's sake.

My mom and dad would be there.

My grandparents.

Kids I went to high school with,

who had scared me then, and still did.

My swimming coach went to my church.

Not to mention the mayor of Charlottesville,

and several members of the Virginia men's basketball team —the town's true
celebrities, then and now.

I still remember how I felt the morning of that sermon.

Oh, the terror.

I was genuinely convinced I was going to throw up —

I spent the entire first half of the service trying to figure out my escape route.

When it actually came time to preach,

I'd *like* to tell you I was filled with new strength,

but in truth I hung onto the pulpit so tight

that my knuckles glowed white — or so said my granddad.

I've been plenty nervous other times since then —
shoot, David and I are nervous every Sunday —
but I've never felt like I felt preaching to my hometown church.

So I listen to this story about Jesus with a lot of sympathy.
'Cause that's what he's doing.
He's preaching to his hometown congregation.
And I thought *I* was a newbie with only one sermon already under my belt —
but Jesus, he's had none. First time preacher.

Because so far, here's what's happened in his life.
He's been born — that's Christmas.
30 years have gone by.
We don't much about those years except that he was a carpenter in his dad's shop.
But something's happening now.
His cousin, John the Baptist,
started speaking out and telling people it was time to repent,
baptizing them in the River Jordan,
and Jesus went and did that. Got baptized.
And then went straight into the desert for 40 days of soul-searching and prayer and
fasting.
And now here he is, in his hometown of Nazareth,
and it's the Sabbath day,
and, well, his hometown Rabbi has invited him to speak.

And Jesus gets up in front of Mary and Joseph
and the kids he grew up with,
and everyone who's known him as Jesus-the-carpenter's-son,
and maybe the mayor of Nazareth was there too, probably so.
He gets up and he looks out at all those familiar faces.
And then he pretty much knocks it out of the park.
Or at least rocks them back on their heels.
Because this is what happens. This is what he does.

He takes hold of the scripture,

the Torah scroll that would have been there,
and he rolls through it until he finds the passage he wants.

Isaiah, chapter 61.

And everybody would have known this passage,
because it was a passage about the Messiah who was going to come,
the Messiah who was going to come and save all Israel.

Jesus reads it to them:

“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 set at liberty those who are oppressed.”

And when he finished reading,
maybe he said something like

“here ends the reading from God’s Holy word,”
like we do here.

and then it was time to give his message.

And it says every eye was upon him,

and that’s not surprising, because they were wondering what this hometown boy was
going to say to them.

And he said this. He said:

“Well, everyone, today that scripture from Isaiah has been fulfilled.

Today, while you were listening to it,
that scripture has come true.”

And at that moment this went from being
hometown boy reads scripture and isn’t that sweet
to something else entirely.

What you have here now is an inaugural address

The hometown boy, Joseph’s kid,

has just announced that he’s the messiah.

The scripture has been fulfilled, he said.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon **me**.

Or, as I put it in our email to the church yesterday,

you could say that this is Jesus' State of the Union address.

Because if a State of the Union speech is meant to tell you, well,
the state of things,
and what your leader is going to do about it —
then that's exactly the speech that Jesus was delivering.
The state of things, he was saying,
is that people are suffering,
there are folks who are poor and oppressed and captive to all kinds of things.
And what I'm here to tell you is that God's Spirit is upon me
to bring good news to them and to all of you.
God's Spirit is upon me to proclaim release,
and to set people free.
God's Spirit is upon me.

Well, you know how it goes at an *actual* State of the Union address.
Whatever the president says,
there are always some people who applaud wildly
and some people who sit on their hands.
Some people who love what they're hearing,
and some people who aren't impressed.
The Gospel tells us that the same thing happens to Jesus.
It tells us that there were a bunch of people who were amazed,
enthralled.
And it tells us that a bunch of others ran him right out of town,
pretty much literally.
Some people decided to join his party,
and some people voted otherwise.

Us? We're the party of Jesus.
We're the Christ followers,
we're the ones who believe that yes,
the Spirit of the Lord was upon him,
yes, the scripture was fulfilled that day,
yes, he was the Messiah,

and yes, he came to bring good news.

We're the party of Jesus, the followers of Christ,
and that means that what he proclaimed,
we proclaim too —
and what he set out to do, that's our mandate too.
Bring good news to those who long for it.
Proclaim release to the captives.
Set at liberty those who are oppressed.

There's a poem I've always loved,
a poem called *the Work of Christmas*.
It's a January poem, it's a poem meant to be read about now,
after the Christmas lights have finally come down
and the wreaths have turned brown,
and the last decoration has been put back in its box in the attic.
It was written by Howard Thurman,
a great African-American theologian and teacher,
and he drew his inspiration from Jesus' State of the Union speech in that Nazareth
synagogue.

And the poem goes like this:

"When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart."

That's our work now.

The work of Christmas —
the work of Christ —
the work of Jesus-followers.
That's our work.

A bunch of us just got back, a little less than three weeks ago,
from India.

We were on the other side of the world,
but we felt like you were right there with us,
because what we were a part of there is what *you're* a part of.
Doesn't matter if you've ever set foot in India or ever will:
your heart is there, your hands are there, your faith is there.
Because the work we were a part of
is work that you make possible,
with your prayers and your kindness and your support of this church's ministry.
And what we were seeing was Christ's work,
the Spirit-filled work of those who are, every day,
bringing good news to the poor
and setting at liberty those who are oppressed.

We ladled rice and dal into bowls held out to us by the poor who had come for their
daily meal.

We sat on the floor of a school in the slums with kids whose bare feet and torn clothes
showed their poverty, but whose laughter showed their delight at being there.
We broke ground for a home, a tiny home in a tiny village,
where a young pastor will now be living,
so that each day he can bring the good news of God's love to those who are hungering
to hear.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon *him*, too.
And each place we went, **you** went with us,
because our work there is your work.
It is the work of Christmas that the poet wrote of.
It is the work that Jesus proclaimed as **his** work
on that day in Nazareth.
It is the work of bringing good news.

Proclaiming liberty to those who are oppressed.

You're doing it there.

You're doing it here.

Any of you here who have been on our Appalachia trip may be wondering why the words of the scripture today sounded kind of familiar. It's because it's the core theology of the Appalachia Service Project, the verses quoted in the very mission statement of ASP.

The founder of ASP 50 years ago, Tex Evans, said

Gladly do we serve the one who said, in the fourth chapter of Luke, I have come to bring good news to the poor.

And every summer in West Virginia, as we gather for worship at the end of a long hot day of repairing roofs and fixing foundations, this is one of the songs we sing:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed.*

We are doing the work of Christmas there;
we are doing the work of Christ-followers,
we are following that Jesus of Nazareth.

In India we are proclaiming good news.

In the hollers of West Virginia we are proclaiming good news.

But right here, too, right here.

For instance.

This week our refugee resettlement committee was at work getting an apartment ready for a family arriving, at the end of one long journey and the beginning of another.

That was Christ's work they were doing; they were bringing good news.

Before Christmas, David and I were at the Webster Arena in Bridgeport watching as dozens — dozens — of people from this church

worked with the Bridgeport Rescue Mission to give clothing to the poor, food to the hungry.

That's Christ's work they were doing.

They were bringing good news.

And, you know, a few days ago, my friend Carla Miklos at Operation Hope posted on Facebook a need for more food in the pantry to help the families of federal workers — and the first response she received was from a church member here, who said *food is on the way*.

I wasn't surprised. Proud, but not surprised.

And [*earlier*] this morning we've celebrated the work of our young people right here in our midst, scouts who, with so much else to choose from to fill their lives, have chosen to be part of an organization whose mandate is to serve others. That's God's work too.

But there's a lot more to be done.

That's the state of things — true when Jesus spoke in Nazareth, true now.

There are people near and far longing to hear good news, good news of God's love, good news of our love.

There *are* the broken to be healed, the hungry to be fed, the lost to be found.

There are families seeking home, and children who wake up in fear.

There **are** captives yearning to be freed.

There is work to be done.

And the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, as it was on a young man in a synagogue in Nazareth two thousand years ago.

Come, follow me, says that man.
We will build the kingdom of God.
We will turn the world towards love.
Because I, I am with you always.
The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, you and I.
And there is work to be done.
Amen.