

Where is the Good News?

Epiphany 4 2019

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Jeremiah 1:4–10, Psalm 71:12-21, 1 Corinthians 14:12-25, Luke 4:21-30

Jesus enters the synagogue and reads the Torah portion for the day,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Then he declares, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your midst.” Today is the day of salvation. It is the day of Good News. It is the day to celebrate the “year of Jubilee” or the “year of the Lord’s favor.” His declaration is the Greatest News that could ever be proclaimed. It is the beginning of all things made new. It is the promised restoration of a world gone wrong. It is the hope of Israel and the longing of the nations.

The Lord has remembered his people and their poor estate. He knows their griefs and sorrows. He knows their questions, doubts, and struggles. He knows how his own people, the people of Israel have been under the thumb of one ruler after another for centuries. They have cried out for Messiah, for the king who will set them free and restore His people to favor. And now Messiah has come.

Jesus stands in the of the synagogue, in the midst of his own hometown, declaring the long-awaited promise is being fulfilled today. Luke has already reminded us before today’s reading that after his baptism, Jesus “returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.” (Luke 4:14-15). These people have heard the stories of his great miracles and great power and authority.

Though they praise his eloquence, they do not trust him and by the end of the day, they will seek to throw him off a cliff. Jesus knows their hearts and he knows that his own people will reject him. As St. John says, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.” (John 1:11)

This little story of their doubt, anger, and attempt to throw him off a cliff is a foreshadowing of what is to come. At some point, the doubt and anger will erupt throughout Jerusalem and the crowds will shout, “Crucify him, Crucify him!” The promise of Good News has fallen on deaf ears and this much acclaimed day of salvation fades.

It looks almost like the promised good news has failed.

Even now, we look out at the world and we continue to ask, “Where is the Good News? The world is so angry, the nation is filled with doubt, violence abounds in speech and sometimes even actions.” For some people, it can feel like we’re “on the eve of destruction.”

Of course, when Augustine wrote “The City of God,” the power of Rome had collapse and the ancient world was passing away. When the Celtic monks were writing their great songs of praise, they were also facing the threat of invasions of pagan warlords, Vikings, and eventually the Normans. When Dante was writing his masterpiece, Europe appeared to be facing the end of all things with famines, wars, and the Black Plague which killed between 75 and 200 million people.

As we survey history, we find age after age when it appears that all things are collapsing and all hope is lost. This has caused more than one person to ask, “Where is the Good News we heard about?”

At times, it seems the good news has fallen onto hard, stony, unyielding ground.<sup>1</sup>

Has the good news fallen on hard, stony ground?

If we return to the Gospel reading, we may find a clue about how this good news will take shape in our world through reading this morning. He references Elijah and Elisha and how both men brought God’s miraculous grace to people outside of Israel.

Elijah appears in the middle of King Ahab’s reign in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. About 50 years earlier, the Nation of Israel had gone through civil war and split into two kingdoms: the Southern Kingdom of Judah and the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Ahab was married to Jezebel, a Baal worshipper from Tyre, and he leads the kingdom of Israel into all sorts of perverse behavior in the worship of Baal. The land is polluted.

In the middle of Ahab’s descent, Elijah shows up and prays that it will not rain. And it doesn’t rain. Why would he pray this prayer? He is dethroning Baal from the Northern Kingdom. At this point in history, Baal has become known as a Thunder god, a god of rain. Yet the prayers of Elijah are greater than the power of this so called god.

Elijah appears to confront the idolatry of the nation while also bringing comfort to the faithful servant of the Lord. Elijah and his protégé Elisha travel the land, minister to the prophets, and even bring healing and strength to those outside of Israel. Peter Leithart suggests that the appearance of Elijah and Elisha marks a shift in the history of God’s people. The age of kings is coming to an end. The Lord is raising up prophets who will speak to the people, prepare the people for exile, and call the people to trust in God and follow the path he prepares as they pass through judgment and destruction with the hope of restoration.

This age of the prophets is coming to fullness in Jesus. He is not only the long-awaited King or Messiah, he is the prophet of God who ushers in a new age where his people will be dispersed again, where Jew and Gentile will become one new man.

In Jesus Christ, the roles of king, prophet and priest all come to fulfillment. When he announces that the Good News is fulfilled today, he is announcing that He is the Good News. He is the

fulfillment of Israel. He is the way, the truth, the life. Past and Future are made present now in Jesus Christ. He is the hope of all humanity.

In his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, he will enter into the judgment upon the nations and bring it to completion. He will lead his people into reconciliation with the Heavenly Father and work through them to bring His Good News to all nations. But it won't look like subjugating the nations by sword. Rather, he will renew all things like yeast leavens bread.

Just as Elijah and Elisha prepared little remnant communities of Jew and Gentile to pass through the coming fire, Jesus is raising up a new family of Jews and Gentiles who will form little communities that will spread throughout the world. These communities, these called out ones, these churches will be outposts of heaven where the Good News begins to be made known.

These communities or churches will be made up of people being healed and redeemed and restored by God's grace. That means that these people will still struggle at times, will still question and grow weary at times. And yet, simultaneously, they will also know the promise that Today is the day of salvation. They will come to know and experience the love of God in Christ Jesus. We see a glimpse of the life of these communities in Acts and in the Epistles.

In our Corinthians lesson today, we heard Paul exhorting the church at Corinth. They are longing to see manifestations of God's Spirit in their midst, but they are competing about which gifts are more important. We read that in 1 Corinthians 11 and 12. But these gifts, these manifestations are all gifts of love meant to build up the church. As Paul writes at the beginning of today's lesson, "since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church." (1 Corinthians 14:12).

That is strive to excel in building up the family of God that surrounds you. 1 Corinthians 13 focuses on how love is the full expression of God's people serving one another even as they serve the world. As I read 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Galatians, Philippians, and other letters exhortation throughout the New Testament, I begin to see a glimpse of the Good News Jesus is talking about in Luke 4. This Good News is beginning to grow in the soil of God's little communities planted all across the empire. These communities are struggling through specific conflicts within their regions as well as within their our little fellowship, and yet they all are looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.

Jesus prays to the Father for these communities in John 17, "The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me. (John 17:22-23). According to Hebrews, Jesus is still praying for us and leading us and strengthening us by His Spirit. He is still guiding us into the fullness of this promise that we might be one even as He and the Father are one.

In the generations from the time of Jesus until today, the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Year of Jubilee is being worked out and made known in small communities across the nations. As Rome is collapsing, Augustine is writing about love and becoming a community of love. As the Celts are facing the threat of invasion and destruction, they are preparing libraries filled with the wisdom across the ages. They are creating illuminated manuscripts like the Book of Kells that still astound today. In the darkest days of World War 2, C. S. Lewis is encouraging students to

keep studying, artists to continue creating. He is even delivering one of the great apologetics for through a series of radio talks that would become Mere Christianity.

As we look around our world, we may grow weary, we may be discouraged, we may lose site of the good news in our midst, in our community, in our worship. Most of the time, we are unaware of the great work that God is doing in and through us, but I would suggest that it is nothing short of the renewing of all things in Christ. In our frailty and fears, He has not forsaken, but calls us to trust Him, to love another, and to His Spirit lead and guide us. So we continue to worship, to create, to love well, to build up is church.

These small, almost unnoticeable acts of love are part of the way the Lord is revealing his good news in the world. Scripture reveals that His Spirit will continue to work, to lead the communities of faith, continue to reveal God's glory. Revelation shows us that by the end of the age, this great communion of love has not failed. The darkness has not won. Death has not conquered. But the hope of God for the nations is fulfilled in the city and the year of Jubilee is made fully manifest. St. John invites us to look to this culmination of love and join in song and praise,

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. <sup>4</sup>He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13 connects the story of the sower with the visit to Nazareth.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Re 21:3–4.