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THE LIBERATOR

Luke 4:14-21

Preached by Rev. Dr. David C. Fisher

There he was, Mary and Joseph's boy, sitting in the seat reserved for visiting speakers. The synagogue was a-buzz with anticipation. They'd heard from friends in neighboring villages that Jesus was quite a speaker — that he had a very exciting message. People were getting excited about him and what he said.

Remarkable, a woman said to her neighbor in the pew. Why just a few years ago, he was a boy in synagogue school. I remember him sitting with his mother in worship; then studying Scripture with his father. Now here he is, an up-and-coming rabbi.

Over in the men's section, a man told another, Someone told me he sounds more like a prophet than anything. He's a young dreamer, they say. Shhh! the service is starting.

The leader of the synagogue stood and led the congregation in a confession of faith, Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4).

Then they prayed in unison the prayer they prayed as individuals each day of their lives. They sang some of the Psalms, they listened to a long Lectionary reading from the first five books of the Bible — called The Torah.

It was time for the Lectionary reading from the prophets. Jesus got up, went to the front and asked the leader for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. It was so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Quickly he rolled the scroll to the passage he wanted to read, Isaiah 61.

Slowly and deliberately he read,

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good
news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor .

He broke off the reading mid-sentence, carefully rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the leader. He sat down not in the chair he came from, but in a special chair, Moses chair, in front of the synagogue. Rabbis taught sitting in this special seat. They were speaking for God from a seat of authority explaining and applying the word of God to the people.

It was an ancient tradition — nearly 500 years old. Since Ezra the prophet, the teachers of Israel read and taught Scripture in the synagogue. This was more than Mary's boy in front of his home synagogue. This was the word of the Lord for the people of God.

Every eye was on Jesus — waiting. He paused and began to explain God's word to the people. Luke sums up Jesus' sermon in a simple sentence. Jesus said, Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Astonishing! What the great prophet promised is here! Today! You heard it here!

The people were amazed. The young dreamer proclaims good news. God's long promised salvation is here at long last.

They knew what Jesus meant and they knew what Isaiah meant, too. That makes it all the more amazing.

Isaiah writes to people in exile. Israel had been cruelly defeated, their land occupied and, finally, the people were deported to far off Babylon where they were cheap labor for their conquerors. Far from home, far from their Temple, it seemed far from God. How do you pass on the ancient faith to the next generation surrounded by pagan gods and practices? One of most poignant Psalms was written from exile.

By the rivers of Babylon —
there we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps .
How [can] we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-2)

Jerusalem was smoking rubble. The Temple of God was destroyed. Their faith was in ruins. Was there a future for themselves, their families, their faith, their nation? Did God care?

Isaiah, the prophet, spoke out, The Spirit of God compels me to say this: good news, captives, you're going home. Good news oppressed, you will be free. Good news brokenhearted, you will find comfort. Good news prisoners, liberation is on the way.

Isaiah promised a reversal of fortune as great as the Exodus when God rescued Israel from slavery. In fact, this liberation would be like the Jubilee Year commanded in the Law of God. The law designated every 50th year Jubilee Year. That year, all debts were cancelled, all land reverted to the original owner, prisoners were set free and the whole land was at rest for the entire year. Everyone got a fresh start, a new beginning.

Hold it, somebody argues. That doesn't seem fair.

Well, God replies in Leviticus 25, think about this! The land doesn't really belong to you. The land belongs to me. You are tenants on my land. So, be generous with what you have. It's gift!

Jesus stood in his home synagogue in Nazareth and told the expectant crowd, Remember that day promised by Isaiah so long ago? I'm here to tell you that day is here — now!

What God promised, a new kind of world was now beginning to be realized. God was starting to renew the earth and restore the broken world. That's what Jesus declared that day.

At Colonial, we call it Jesus Dream for the World. It's the new creation Jesus preached and taught about. It's the world God wants here and now. And, that world is on the way.

In the new creation of God no one will be poor, hungry or homeless. Prosperity of soul, mind and body will be normal. In fact, with the prophets, Jesus promised that this new world will be like a great heavenly banquet. It's a table of bounty, food better than you've ever known; wine better than any vintage of any year in any age. And, most important of all, everyone, everywhere, has a place at the table. No one will ever be left out — ever.

And the greatest miracle of all: those with plenty will be more than willing to share it with those who don't have enough! No one will be left behind. No one will start life behind everyone else and no one will receive an advantage in life because of birth or good fortune. Life will be fair. Period!

Besides that, in God's new world there will be no more war, no prisoners, no terrorists, no dictators, no conquerors and no oppressed people. Everyone will be free.

The Cliff Notes version of God's vision for the world is summed up in three huge biblical words. The first is justice. Everyone gets a fair deal. No one will twist the law for advantage. No one will cut corners to make a buck at someone's expense.

The second word is righteousness. That means everyone will do what is right every time and all the time. We'll know the truth and tell the truth. God's sense of right and wrong will belong to all of us. Everything will be put right and done right.

The third word is peace. Peace in the Bible is not only the absence of conflict and war, it's also the presence of everything that is good. It's prosperity in the widest possible meaning of the term.

That day back in Nazareth, Jesus placed his life, his strength and his resources, behind God's new creation. And, Jesus calls us to join him and give our lives, strength and resources to God's cause on earth.

But notice something very important. Jesus didn't start off on his mission on his own. Luke carefully tells us Jesus came to this moment in the power of the Holy Spirit. And, Jesus, adds, it's God's Spirit that gives him this good news. And it's God who will make things new.

We're not creating anything when we line up behind God's cause on earth. We're joining God's work in the world. That happens in and through the church, of course. We are God's people on God's mission in Jesus' name. But God's cause is also advanced in hundreds of causes that build God's kind of world whether or not they carry God's name.

The important point is to know that being a follower of Jesus Christ is to be committed to reorganizing the world under God's shalom. It's the vocation of the church and each of us who bear God's name.

Moreover, God's cause is not some idea or ideal we merely dream about. God's cause is not summed up in the bumper sticker, Visualize Peace. Instead, God's people resemble that other slogan, Just do it. Do what is just. Do what is right. Do what makes peace. Do God's will on earth — as it is in heaven.

A generation ago, a young dreamer, Martin Luther King, detected a flaw in the American Dream few saw and fewer thought could be corrected. In the name of God and the spirit of Jesus Christ, King exposed and confronted the blinding power of American racism. Implicit in the north and institutionalized in the south, racism cruelly oppressed black Americans — and the specter of racism continues to haunt our national life.

King was able to gather the weight of public opinion against the power of states and the machinery of the federal government. He called for justice, fairness and prosperity for black Americans. He asked for a place at the table of the American Dream.

He dreamed of a new kind of world on the lines of Jesus' Dream. He summed it up in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize,

I refuse to accept the idea that the "is-ness" of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "ought-ness" that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality. I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations, can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men. I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality, and freedom for their spirits. I still believe that one day mankind will bow down before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and nonviolent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land. I still believe that we shall overcome. (in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* ed. by Clayborne Carlson)

King opened the eyes of a generation of people like me and he unlocked the vault of the conscience of America and the world changed. The task is not yet complete. That battle is now in the wills and conscience of America and the church. There's more work to be done. There's still too much poverty, hunger, injustice and war and far too little of God's shalom on earth.

Jesus calls us to pray thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth - and to mean it come what may. Jesus calls us to long for God's kind of world until it becomes a passion for that world reorganizes our life and faith. Jesus calls us to give him our lives.

Let me ask you something. Is there anything you are willing to die for? I know there's plenty to live for, but is there anything you'd die for? Would you die for sake of the kingdom of God?

King and his associates were despised, beaten, thrown in jail. King died for the cause, God's cause. And if he were here today, Martin Luther King would say it was worth it, because the cause was just.

The night before he died, King gave what was a prophetic speech. In it he mentioned the time he was stabbed in New York City and nearly died. The knife was so close to King's aorta the *New York Times* reported if he'd sneezed he'd have died.

Then King told of one of the many letters he received on that occasion and mused about his own life and possible death. Listen to the voice of King,

But there was another letter that came from a little girl, a young girl who was a student at the White Plains High School. And I looked at the letter and I'll never forget it. It said simply, Dear Dr. King: I am a ninth-grade student at the White Plains High School. She said, While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I'm a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I'm simply writing to you to say that I'm so happy that you didn't sneeze.

I want to say that I too am happy that I didn't sneeze. Because if I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American Dream and taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1961, when we decided to take a ride for freedom and ended segregation in interstate travel.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been around here in 1962, when Negroes in Albany, Georgia, decided to straighten their backs up. And whenever men and women

straighten their backs up, they are going somewhere, because a man can't ride your back unless it is bent.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been here in 1963, when the black people of Birmingham, Alabama, aroused the conscience of this nation and brought into being the Civil Rights Bill.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have had a chance later that year, in August, to try to tell American about a dream that I had had.

If I had sneezed, I wouldn't have been down in Selma, Alabama, to see the great movement there.

If I had sneeze, I wouldn't have been in Memphis to see a community rally around those brothers and sisters who are suffering. I'm so happy that I didn't sneeze.

I left Atlanta this morning, and as we got started on the plane — there were six of us — the pilot said over the public address system, We are sorry for the delay, but we have Dr. Martin Luther King on the plane. And to be sure that all of the bags were checked and to be sure that nothing would be wrong on the plane, we had to check our everything carefully. And we've had the plane protected and guarded all night.

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out, or what would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers.

Well, I don't know what will happen now; we've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life — longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land., And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

(Autobiography)