

## A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 4:14-21

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While I would normally recommend telling the whole story both weeks, this inevitably would focus attention on the puzzle of the people's rage at Jesus. Jesus' citation of Isaiah, which is his reading of the scroll, reflects the traditions of the synagogue. The outline of the service in a traditional first century synagogue service was a gathering. The readings from the scriptures—a Torah reading followed by a reading from the prophets—and then the benedictions or prayers, a conclusion by the overseer of the synagogue and a benediction. If there was a rabbi present, there would be a sermon after the reading of the scriptures. This story reflects that custom. Jesus stands up to read the Scriptures and then sits down to interpret the scriptures, which is a reflection of the order and the process of ancient synagogue worship.

The actual reading in Luke 4 is a conflation of three different passages from Second Isaiah. They are quotations from the Greek version of Isaiah rather than from the Hebrew text. Luke has conflated these so that they have a rhythm that is not present in the actual text of Isaiah. The order of those to whom Jesus (by implication) is sent begins with "the poor." He is sent to proclaim good news to the poor. Good news to the poor means good news to Israel. "Poor" was a frequent synonym for an Israelite. In the first century most Israelites were poor because of the rates of taxation that the Romans imposed upon them, so they identified themselves as "the poor."

"The imprisoned" probably refers to debtors prison; that is, to people who were thrown into prison because of indebtedness. This was another instance of the oppressive character of the Roman economic system as it was experienced in provinces such as Palestine.

The third group to which Jesus is sent is "the blind." He is sent to give sight to the blind. This is on the one hand a literal task that Jesus accomplishes by giving sight to blind people. Thus, there are several stories in the gospels about Jesus giving sight to a blind person. The classic instances are the story of Bartimaeus (Mark 10) and the man born blind (John 9).

The fourth group is "the downtrodden." He is sent to send them away relieved or released. In other words, he is to enable those who have been oppressed by the Romans to receive release, forgiveness of their debts, and relief from the oppressive character of Roman government. This is specifically addressed to people who were suffering under Roman oppression.

We still tend to think of the Roman period as a time of peace, tranquility, and prosperity for all the people of the Roman Empire. That is the result of first century propaganda via the Roman government in which there is constant proclamation that everybody was

happy and wealthy and that their government was great. It is also the result of classical scholars regularly identifying this era as a great time in history. For example, classical scholars have generally characterized Roman slavery and the Roman slave system as a beneficent slave system. This characterization has been totally discredited by recent research.

Approximately 50% of the people in Roman Empire were slaves. Slaves had absolutely no rights. One of the practices in all the major Roman cities was to crucify slaves. There were businesses outside the gates of every major Roman city where people could be crucified for a couple of bucks. If a slave burned dinner or refused to have sex or spoke in a way that was offensive to the owner, they could just have them crucified. This happened on a daily basis. Crucifixion businesses were run outside the gate so that all the slaves who came in the city could see what would happen if they didn't do everything that the master told them to do.

Many of the slaves were citizens of countries that had been conquered by the Roman army. At the time of the Jewish War, virtually all Jewish young men and women between 16 and 35 were taken as slaves to Rome. This is reflected in the design on the arch of Titus. That's what Jesus is talking about here. What Second Isaiah had in mind was that Israel would be freed from the oppression of Gentile governments.

The year of the Lord's favor that is to be proclaimed is the period of Jesus' own life. The phrase, "the year of the Lord's favor," is substituted in the Lucan quotation for "the day of vengeance of our God" that is present in Second Isaiah.

Jesus' exposition of the reading is a proclamation of the fulfillment of scripture, which for Jesus and Luke were the Hebrew scriptures—what we would call the Old Testament. Jesus interprets the scriptures as a series of predictions that are now being realized or fulfilled in his life. The promises of consolation for Zion are being granted in a new way. That is what is being proclaimed in the Gospel of Luke.

The response of the people to Jesus' interpretation of the scriptures is amazement and admiration. They are surprised at his graceful words and at his great preaching. Their initial response is extraordinarily positive. They are amazed at Jesus' captivating eloquence. This response reflects the expectations and assumptions of both the audience in the synagogue in Nazareth and Luke's audience some 50-60 years later. They understood the "good news" as consolation and redemption for Israel. This part of the story is "good news" for "us."

The next part of the story is the reversal of that expectation and that is the subject of interpretation in the next week of the lectionary. For this week, I suggest that we focus on making specific the characteristics of the Kingdom of God that is proclaimed in Jesus' reading. All of the things that are described are valid descriptions of the new government of God. They are signs that continue to happen and are therefore the focus of ministry of those who would follow Jesus.

I recommend that you tell this story with vim and vigor. It is a story of good news. It is a story of Jesus' authority, of his ability to read, of his announcement of the coming of the government of God into the world. It is a story that invites energy, good cheer, and positive vibes.