

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

The Failed Hero Who Saves

Luke 4:14–21 (NRSV)

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Analysis by Nathan Hall

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: 18 “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 let the oppressed go free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” 20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”



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their God is strong.*

DIAGNOSIS: Disappointing Heroes

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): We Want a Hero

It is nothing new to be fixated upon a hero, one who will show up and save the day. From Gilgamesh to Marvel people are looking for someone with superhuman power who can overcome the troubles that blight human existence. To mythologize, is there some “Antman” who can shrink to the molecular level, change the RNA of the coronavirus, and set us all free. We, like Jesus’ original audience long for freedom. When Jesus says he has been anointed, they got the message. This is the anointed king. This is the Messiah we have been waiting for. This is the warrior Christ of the line of David who will free us from the Roman oppressors. That’s exciting news.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Longing for a Better World

The reason we want a hero is that we are dissatisfied. We have ideas about how the world should be. Jesus experienced Roman oppression. We long to be free of COVID constraints. We want to be free from disagreements over which COVID precautions are appropriate. We long to be free from the scorn of those with whom we do not see eye to eye. The world lets us down. We want to be vindicated. We want things to get fixed according to our own notions.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Failed Save

Jesus' hearers look for a savior who will fulfill their plans for Israel to be self-governed (spoiler alert: that is not the savior they get). Certain Christians may turn to televangelists who promise to heal them of COVID through the TV screen. Others of us put our hope in the CDC and other governmental agencies, hospitals, and the good sense of our neighbors. In all cases, the outlook looks particularly bleak as the omicron variant wreaks havoc, at least in the short term. And where is God in all this? Why has God not just fixed it all? I don't know.



PROGNOSIS: The Failed Hero Who Saves

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Good out of Evil

Faith in Christ teaches us that where our plans and hopes fail, there God is strong. In the cross, God brings life out of death. We are joined to that hope in our baptism. In the worst things COVID and our society throw at us, God's salvation is near. This salvation does not promise that COVID will end immediately. It promises that death does not have the last word. It promises that impending doom is not the end of the world. In the weakness of the cross God brings salvation.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Living by Faith

Our hope is in stark contrast to what one might expect given all indications. Just think, if COVID doesn't wipe us out, if there is not another civil war in the United States if global superpowers do not nuke us all if climate change doesn't get us,

some other existential threat will. And yet the power of the Gospel is that we live in hope, that in the weakness of God displayed on the cross hangs the full power of God for the salvation of the world.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Anti-Heroes

The surprising hope of the gospel creates a space for love in us. We are able to love our fellow creatures. Nobody is going to be the hero we are looking for, no matter how they posture themselves. But we get to demonstrate love to those neighbors in our own small ways, knowing that the world already has a savior who is reconciling all things.