

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

RELEASE FOR THE CAPTIVES

Luke 4:14-21

Third Sunday after the Epiphany Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

14Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 16When 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, 17and 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, 19to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” 20And 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. 21Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

DIAGNOSIS: Preaching to Captive Ears

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Hearing Reports of Preaching and Captivity*

“Jesus is coming home!” Galilee was abuzz with the news that the young man they had nurtured as a serious student of the scriptures was now returning as a famous teacher of the scriptures. Everyone wanted to hear him in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. Surely he would make them proud. He had met interesting and influential people while he was gone, including John the baptizer, whom King Herod had just arrested. One does not remain unchanged after seeking out experiences with people like John, who are committed to speaking truth to power regardless of the consequences.

Jesus did make his way home changed. John had baptized him to prepare for the coming of the reign of God. That reign came straight on him as the Holy Spirit filled him and he was affirmed as God’s beloved Son. Now he was going back to begin God’s reign at home. Jesus’ community had given generously to him as he was growing up; they had fed him with the best of God’s Word. Now it was time for them to receive from him. That Word was being fulfilled and coming alive in him.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Hearing Preaching about Captivity*

The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus as he sat down to comment on the Prophet Isaiah. The returning Jesus had chosen to read passages about their ancestors’ homecoming from exile in Babylon, about their release from captivity. Release into what? Into a new captivity, this time on their own land, now under the Romans, who put people like Herod in power, Herod who arrested people like John. Everyone was weary, living under new rules of occupation all the time, rulers succeeding one another, redistricting, and so on, constantly changing and never getting better. Maybe Jesus could find a way to rekindle hope that one day this captivity, too, would end. God did not seem to be in a hurry about it, though. (We might think the same thing today as we scan our world.) Wait! Did Jesus just say “today

this scripture has been fulfilled”? Where? “In your hearing”—what does that mean? Jesus shouldn’t make claims that he can’t fulfill. I don’t see the welcome year of the Lord breaking in. John, for example, is still in prison. You know what they say, “Those who can’t do, teach.” He is, after all, only the son of Mary and Joseph, one of us. Those are nice words, Jesus, but they are not true.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Captive Ears Not Hearing Preaching about Release*

While Jesus was gone, John the baptizer was not the only one he met. Newly baptized, Jesus had encountered the Devil and struggled with temptation for forty days in the barren hills of the Judean desert. Animated by God’s Holy Breath, Jesus was not taken captive. But now Jesus was again face to face with this power, this time at work in his kin, driving oppression so deep that they were captivated from the inside out, locked in despair, cynicism, and unbelief. How would Jesus breathe the Word of freedom from God into the ears of his people to release them from their captivity and restore their hearing? Until this happened, they would only hear God’s words of promise as a lie that would never come true; so it is for us, and thus God can never reign for us. We remain in captivity.

PROGNOSIS: Ears Released to Hear

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Hearing Released from Captivity*

This is not a problem God can solve by bursting down on us with a flaming sword to sever our defective ears. That would only ally God, in our minds, with oppression. So the day of the Lord comes to the people of Nazareth in the winsome form of a good and beloved face, the face of one who knew their life because he was from there. Jesus knew their old way of hearing as if it were his own. Jesus, whose Lukan lineage ends with “son of Adam,

son of God" (3:38), went into the exile of sin with humanity and joined himself to all the people being baptized by John for repentance and forgiveness of sin. When he returned home to his own people, he came filled with the Holy Spirit—who is the Lord and giver of life from the beginning to the end and all along the way. In Jesus the creative Word of God becomes a new creation enveloping all humanity. In this new creation the Spirit removes our old hearing aids, so full of devilish static, and gives us the hearing of Jesus. God releases us from captivity from the inside out.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Hearing Preaching about Release*

That means that we and the people of Nazareth can now hear the promises of God and believe them. God makes big promises for those who get an earful and take the risk of living trusting that these promises are true and truly fulfilled in Jesus. Such faith makes us free so that nothing has dominion over us. When we, the poor included (v. 18), can hear and see and speak good news, then we are in the reign of God for real. It is not a lie. The reign of God itself has created the life of freedom that values all, even when that involves dangerous opposition to the forces of oppression in this world.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Released Hearing Leads to Living*

The reign of God may have been more than Jesus' community was expecting when they welcomed him back home. Just as they had nurtured him into the custom of hearing the Word of God, so he nurtured them into the custom of living out the Word of God, as most residents of Nazareth do still today. He has made them proud. He gave himself to them as he does to all of us in Spirit and Word, bread and wine, and living community. In this way "the joy of the Lord is [our] strength" (Nehemiah 8:10), as it was for John the baptizer and for Jesus himself in the face of

powers that arrest and hold captive but do not and cannot ultimately reign.