

Third Sunday after the Epiphany

SCRIPTURE OPENED

Luke 4:14-21

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Analysis by Cathy Lessmann

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: Understanding Scripture Awry

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Enraged Legalism*

In the verses following this pericope, the Nazarenes, Jesus’ own people (!), become “filled with rage” and actually set out to

kill him because of the way he has interpreted scripture (4:28-29). First, he had declared that he is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, that in him God's jubilee promise is happening: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21). A bit later he claimed (4:22-27) that the obvious message of Scripture's history and prophets is that God intends to lavish his salvation upon gentiles as well as chosen Israel, maybe even ahead of Israel. This so enrages them that they drive him out of town (v. 29) and try to throw him off a cliff (vv. 29-30), a punishment reserved for false prophets. What a contrast between Jesus "filled with the power of the Spirit," (v. 14) and these apparently devoid of the Spirit.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Awry Teaching*
Luke calls Jesus didaskale (teacher), thirteen times in this gospel, and uses the verb didaskein (teaching) fourteen times in describing Jesus' activity in the synagogues and temple. Six times he calls Jesus epistate (master). Obviously, an intense conflict has arisen because teacher Jesus understands the Scriptures differently from the teacher scribes and Pharisees. Whereas Jesus sees the theme of promise (God working to save all sinners), the others have focused only on the regulations (God's Law). But really, who can blame them? Isn't it our basic human nature to crave power, to want to control the events and people around us? Doesn't that extend also to wanting to control, "regulate," God by our deeds and actions? (One definition of religion is, after all, "something one believes in and follows devotedly," Random House Unabridged Dictionary.) If we can use God's own laws to justify ourselves and maintain our superior socio-economic status, isn't that all for the better? Jesus exposed this extreme focus on Law, which turns a blind eye to Promise, as teaching gone very much awry.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Captivity and Oppression*

There “blind” teaching is a grave tragedy. When one focuses only on the Law, one is blind to the Promise, and so misses the benefits of Promise when it is fulfilled. Left to stand only in the presence of God’s Law, one has to stand before “His Honor” and be judged and sentenced on the basis of that very same Law. This makes the ensuing imprisonment (be it captivity or oppression) not just self-inflicted, but God-inflicted.

PROGNOSIS: Understanding Scripture Aright

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : Release and Freedom

Yet, Jesus explains: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (v. 21). Meaning, he is the teacher who not only interprets the scriptures, but is the content of that scripture as well! He will fulfill God’s promises. He will bring release (aphesis, which also means forgiveness) to us captives, He will bring sight to us who are blinded (either literally, or figuratively-by our narrow focus on Law). How? In a stunning turn-about: He will free those who are oppressed or held captive (by the Law) by succumbing to that Law himself, on a cross. As he later explained (after His crucifixion and resurrection) to the two disciples on their way to Emmaus, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Aright Teaching

“Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Thus, the theme of the scriptures is JESUS, God’s promise given and fulfilled and available to all. Promises are realized when they are trusted, so when the Promise is trusted (we call it faith), the blindfolds come off and we “see” the theme of Promise throughout the Scriptures as clearly as Jesus

did.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Infusion of the Spirit*

Jesus was anointed with the Spirit (the active presence of God) at his baptism ultimately for the benefit of the poor, the oppressed, the blind, the captives (vv. 14, 18, 19); so we who are Jesus-trusters, at our baptisms are likewise imbued with that Spirit for the sake of the poor, oppressed, and captives. And just as Jesus was filled with the “power of the Spirit” (v. 14), so too we are given the Spirit’s power-not for selfish use, but to facilitate God’s mercy-managing reign on earth, here and now.