

9.7.25 Sermon Transcript – Luke 4:16-21

Well, this past week, we just passed the 104th anniversary of the Battle of Blair Mountain, which was a piece of history that I knew absolutely nothing about until I moved to West Virginia in 2009. And one of the first things Darick said to me was, “Here, read this book, *Storming Heaven* by Denise Giardina.” And I knew nothing about the history of the mine wars. But the Battle of Blair Mountain was the largest labor uprising in United States history, where there were more than 10,000 coal miners from southern West Virginia who marched for their rights to unionize for fair pay, for freedom against the company town system, and ultimately, what they were met with was about 3,000 lawmen, strikebreakers, and company-hired deputies who used machine guns and tear gas and even private planes to drop bombs in order to deter the mine workers. Eventually, after several days, federal troops were sent in, and ultimately the miners, many of whom were World War I veterans, laid down their arms because it was an overwhelming force against them. While that uprising was initially crushed, it actually galvanized the labor movement in the working class, resisting against economic injustice here in our own state. I couldn't help but think of this piece of history this week as I was reading the scripture passage, as I was meditating on these words that Luke gives us in his Gospel, where Jesus has come to the synagogue in his hometown, and he says, “The spirit of the Lord is upon me.” And I couldn't help but think about it in light of Howard Thurman's book *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which is a book that will be an underpinning of the sermons over the next few weeks.

For those who don't know, Howard Thurman was a theologian, a philosopher, an educator, an author, and a civil rights activist, writing in the shadow of Jim Crow. His work was very influential in the civil rights movement in our country. But the miners at Blair Mountain were classic examples of what Howard Thurman calls the “disinherited,” people with their backs against the wall. They lived in company towns where coal companies controlled the houses, the stores, the churches, the schools. Basically, their whole lives were owned by the companies. They didn't even receive money. They received scrip. They were trapped in debt, couldn't escape, and were constantly under the threat of eviction or of violence, of destitution. There was a daily burden of fear, of hunger, of blacklisting, of armed guards even coming in.

When Jesus steps into that synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry, he reads Isaiah's words of promise and he claims them for himself: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” It's a declaration not only about who he is, but about what his mission will be – and his mission will be good news to the poor. Release for the captives. Recovery of sight for the blind. Freedom for the oppressed. Howard Thurman, as he wrote in the shadow of Jim Crow and racial terror, heard those words not as some kind of abstract truth, but as a life and death truth and an embodied reality. And so he begins his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited* with this question, which is our question today: What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those whose backs are against the wall? That is the question for us.

What does Jesus' mission mean today for those who are disinherited, for those who are pushed aside, who are silenced, who are marginalized, who are hurt? Howard Thurman reminds us that Jesus was not born into privilege, but he was born into poverty. He was a Jew in a land occupied by

Rome. His people were taxed and conscripted and even terrorized at times by soldiers. And his childhood memories would have included memories of some of this brutality that he himself would have witnessed at the hands of Rome. So when Jesus begins his ministry with this declaration in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, we have to understand a few things in order to more fully grasp the significance of these words and of this place.

Luke places this episode right after Jesus's baptism and his temptation in the wilderness and his return, as Luke says "in the power of the Spirit." In Matthew and in Mark's Gospel, they place Jesus beginning in his ministry in Galilee by teaching and by preaching and healing. But in Luke's Gospel, it begins in the synagogue in Nazareth, in Jesus's hometown. And this isn't just a hometown story about Jesus. This is where Jesus is setting the agenda, the tone of his whole ministry. This is it – this is his mission statement. He is announcing that he is here, and the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. And this is what the good news is.

He's citing the prophet Isaiah, mainly Isaiah 61, a little bit from Isaiah 58, and there's a little splash of Leviticus in there too. And so when he's quoting Isaiah 61, it was originally a word of hope to people who were in exile, who were returning from Babylon, promising that God's spirit would anoint someone to bring them renewal and freedom and hope after they had been living under foreign occupation. Isaiah 58 was a critique of empty religion, reminding people that worship is only true worship if it's about setting the oppressed free, if it's connected to breaking the yokes of injustice, and that worship devoid of those things is no worship at all. And then finally we hear at the end of Jesus words that he proclaims the year of the Lord's favor, which is a reference to the concept of Jubilee, of the radical practice of every 50 years canceling debt, freeing slaves, and returning land, which was basically a way to reset the economy and reset equity so that wealth didn't get further and further concentrated into the hands of a few. These are the things that Jesus is directly referencing or alluding to in his hometown sermon, the very first thing that he preaches.

And so when he combines these texts, Jesus, is making an assertion that his mission is not just about some sort of personal or private spirituality, but that communal liberation is at the very heart of his mission, of his work, and of his message. We also have to remember that Jesus lived in a time under Roman occupation. People lived under Roman military control. There was heavy taxation, there was forced land seizure. All of these things were happening. And so there were many of his neighbors who were deeply in debt and in servitude. There was a lot of economic strain at this time as well. Small farmers would often lose their ancient ancestral lands to be taken over by wealthy elites. That's a familiar story to West Virginia – the taking away of land from the people who have lived there in order to use it and concentrate its wealth in the hands of those who already have much. When Jesus is talking about freeing captives and freeing the oppressed, they weren't metaphors. He was describing very real economic realities for the people he was living amongst.

And then finally, the synagogue is the place where he starts. The synagogue is the center of communal life and identity and worship and teaching. And by reading Isaiah in this context, Jesus is saying something really important. He's making this bold religious and political claim that God's promises of liberation are being fulfilled in him, right here, right now, in the midst of community.

That communal identity is important. And Jesus, when he's speaking these words in Luke 4, he's not speaking from "above" somewhere, but from within the struggle that existed in the world around him. He wasn't aligning himself with the powerful, but he was aligning himself with the poor in Galilee, with the tenant farmers, with the widows, with the enslaved. His Good news was a word from below, from the underside of history.

Now, Howard Thurman, in his book, in his first chapter, he talks about fear as being one of the greatest burdens of the disinherited. He says the poor under empire live always under threat of violence, of eviction, of hunger, and fear becomes a constant companion. And yet here in Luke 4, in Jesus' sermon in the synagogue, he says God's Spirit is in fact with the poor. God's favor rests not on those who wield power, but on those who suffer under it. He disrupts fear with his word. The synagogue crowd might have been expecting Jesus to give words that flattered the powerful, but instead, Jesus centers the disinherited.

Now here's where I think we really come to it. What is in fact the Good News? The Good News is not sentimentality. The Good News is not some sort of privatized, spiritualized piety, though certainly, certainly faith in Christ personal and certainly it does call us to reflect on ourselves and our own actions. But ultimately, it is not limited to that. It's not a spiritualized escape from hardship. That's not the Good News. It's concrete. It's release from debt and captivity. It's freedom from systems of oppression. It's healing for those who are crushed in body and in spirit. It's jubilee, that great reset where land, and wealth, and dignity are restored. Thurman insists that Jesus' religion is for those who have their backs against the wall, and that demands that we too recognize and practice our faith in such a way that aligns with the bringer of the Good News.

To spiritualize this away betrays the Gospel. So Jesus had his Nazareth moment in the synagogue at the beginning of his ministry, the inauguration of his ministry, and it's often referred to his inaugural address. That's what this passage is in Luke 4 is. But when Jesus claims Isaiah's words as his mission, the people of his hometown, at first they were maybe impressed a little bit. But then they started to get mad. They started to get upset. They wanted to chase Jesus out of there. They didn't want him there – because it's one thing, I think, to nod along to the concept of justice and say, "Oh, yeah, that sounds really good, Jesus." But then when it actually starts to disrupt privilege, well, then that's where it starts to get uncomfortable. We say, "Well, maybe you went a little bit too far, Jesus. Let's just keep it nice, and about what's here, what's in my heart, and how I feel about people and things." But Jesus teaches us that the good news is indeed good news, but it is not cheap news. And so how will we be a people of good news and not cheap news?

So first, I think it calls us to stand with the vulnerable, not the powerful. Cheap news says as long as my church is free to worship or as long as I can keep going about my life and I'm okay, I don't need to worry about others as long as my freedoms are protected. But the good news says if my immigrant neighbor is being targeted, if my LGBTQ kid is being excluded, if black communities are surveilled, then my freedom is, in fact, tied to theirs. Good news recognizes that good news for me also has to be good news for everybody. It's not just about me and Jesus, and that for all of us, our well-being and our flourishing is bound up together.

In this gospel of Jesus Christ, we have to proclaim truth when lies dominate. So cheap news might say, avoid conflict. Don't upset the apple cart. And I told you all this before, but I am a people pleaser. I am a conflict-avoidant person because it makes me deeply uncomfortable and I can't stand the thought of somebody not liking me. For me, I struggle with it. And so cheap news would be me saying, "I care in my heart, I'm a good person, but I'm going to avoid this conflict that'll just somehow make things worse. I'm not going to get into it." Well, that's cheap news. But good news speaks truth even when it's costly. God's kingdom is in a category of its own where all are brought in, where all are fed at the table. And so we recognize as the church that God's kingdom does not bow to lies, or propaganda, or exclusivity, or anything that says that person or those people are somehow not worthy of the full dignity of a human being. Proclaim truth where lies dominate.

We're called to practice jubilee economics. Cheap news says, "Charity is good enough. It's good enough for me to give out of what I have." And certainly, certainly we should. I am not saying that we should not. But charity is not, in fact enough, because good news says God demands justice. Systems need to be changed so that no one is trapped in perpetual poverty or cycles of harm, which is what Jubilee is all about disrupting. It's that reset, a reestablishment, of a world that is more equitable. Good news, not cheap news.

We're called to form communities of courage. As St. Marks, we're called to be a community of courage. Cheap news is, if we're here as a church and all we're doing is comforting the comfortable, then we're not proclaiming the good news is. The good news instead is embodied in a community that recognizes that where fear is disrupted, where dignity is restored, where people learn to resist hate with love, that's where the good news is.

Jesus says, the spirit of the Lord is upon me. As the church, we are called to recognize the spirit of the Lord is upon us. And so we don't need to be afraid. We don't need to be afraid of being courageous, of standing up for those who are hurting, of working to hear those who are harmed, of seeking to make sure every single person experiences the dignity of one created in the image of God. We're also called to reclaim worship as resistance – it's good to be here gathered together to recognize that we are all called to belong, but that leads us out of here as well to proclaim a message that God loves all and that God is for all. Worship isn't just about like private inspiration. Worship is meant to teach us how to live every single day, to declare that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar, not anyone or anything else.

We're also called to choose solidarity over silence. We talked about that a bit a few weeks ago when we looked at James Cone and Audre Lorde in our Holy Disruptors series. Cheap news says, "Well, I'll pray privately for this situation, this circumstance, this thing that's going on." And certainly, yes, we should still do that. But it doesn't end there. Good news says, "I will risk reputation and comfort to stand publicly with those who are being harmed."

What does the religion of Jesus have to say to those with their backs against the wall? This is the question that Howard Thurman asks 75 years ago. This is the question that Jesus still asks us to consider today. What does it mean for you, my church, my people, to stand with those who have

their backs against the wall? Jesus word is still, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me to let the oppressed go free."

As Jesus was there in his synagogue in his hometown, he said, today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. I've always struggled the most with that line of this because it's as if he is saying, this is not something that will happen in the future. This is something here and now that is done, that is being completed. That word today, I think, still echoes for us. Ultimately, we have the hope that God's kingdom will come to completion one day, and it will be a world radically different than the one that we experience now.

But we also have to recognize that it's not only in the future. "Today," Jesus said, "It has been fulfilled in your hearing." And so the good news is, in fact, fulfilled when the church takes its stand with the disinherited, when we let fear give way to freedom instead, when we live as if God's favor truly does in fact belong to all people, especially the least and the last. This is not an easy gospel. I mean, there's a reason Jesus was crucified. This is not an easy message. The good news is not easy news. It is not cheap news. It is costly. And it might provoke anger, even as it did in Nazareth amongst the people that Jesus grew up with, who would have known him as a boy down the street. They wanted to chase him out of there. They wanted him to stop. But the Gospel is indeed good news. And it is the only news that matters for those who have their backs against the wall. So hear it again. The Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus, and the Spirit of the Lord is also upon us. May it be fulfilled today. Amen.