

January 26, 2025

Who He Says He Is

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“Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, ‘Who do the crowds say that I am?’ They answered, ‘John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’”

To which Peter gives his answer, and gets one of his great moments in the spotlight: “The Messiah of God.”

No, this isn’t our gospel text for this morning – this story comes some five chapters later in Jesus’ ministry

But, this question and the concept of grasping who Jesus is comes to mind when reading this morning’s gospel

Rather than getting other people’s answers of who they think Jesus is, this morning Luke tells the story of Jesus directly telling us who he is

Elisabeth Johnson, a Minister and theologian from MN notes in her commentary on this text that “This is an inaugural address of sorts. What Jesus says here represents the heart of his message and mission. Of course, his message and mission do not come out of the blue, but from the Scriptures.”¹

“He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘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, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ 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. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-414-21-5>

“Right here, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus tells us clearly what his mission is about,” Elisabeth writes. “He boldly claims to fulfill the words of Isaiah, who speaks of the Spirit anointing him, sending him, compelling him to bring good news to every one of God’s children who is bound up, pressed down, broken in spirit, impoverished, imprisoned, and desperately hungry for good news.”

The lectionary doesn’t give us the crowd’s reaction to Jesus’ message – we get to chew on it first

So...what do you think of Jesus’ proclamation? How do you think the crowd reacted to hearing Jesus’ inaugural address?

I hear Jesus’ proclamation and I feel heartened, hopeful, excited, motivated, energized! Yes, Lord! Bring this energy into the world, please!

Well, spoiler alert for those of you who are going to rush home after the service today and read what comes next in this story – the people who hear Jesus’ message...don’t dig it.

At first they do – at first they think this sounds great – like me!

And then Jesus clarifies what he means and when he does so he says something to the effect of “if you hear yourself in this narrative I want to be clear, that when I say I have come to proclaim good news to the poor, I mean the poor. When I say I have come to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind I mean those who are captive to systems of oppression and those who are blind to the plight of others. When I say that I came to let the oppressed go free, I mean that the structures that oppressed people in the first place have got to go. And I don’t just mean the people in our immediate circle, I mean this for everybody.”

Well, after that explanation, Jesus’ ministry is not as palatable to the crowd

Pastor Johnson shares: “Good news to the poor and the ‘year of the Lord’s favor’ sound great until we get into the nitty-gritty of what that means. The idea of a radical

redistribution of property and wealth, for example, will not sound like good news to many of us who live comfortable lives and do not want to give up what we have. The idea of welcoming certain groups of people into our communities will be unsettling for some.”

The way of Jesus is great news, *and* it asks, no - it *requires* something of all of us

It requires us to give up a little, to let go, to relinquish control

It requires us to interrogate our selves and our communities, to name histories and existing structures that oppress and abuse others, and to stop perpetuating the diminishment of others explicitly or implicitly

It requires some element of discomfort for the sake of uncovering truth and true relationships

It requires de-centering ourselves and allowing the margins to teach and guide the way

Jesus’ community liked Jesus’ message until they realized it cost them something - their privilege, their comfort, their sense of entitlement to God’s singular attention and love

So they run him out of the city and chase him away

But Jesus is undeterred by their response – perhaps he is even prepared for it

The rest of Luke’s stories about Jesus in his gospel confirm that Jesus didn’t allow his hometown’s reaction to his message of radical love and grace to deter him from the very ministry the Spirit affirmed in him that day in the synagogue

In fact, perhaps it emboldened him

All the more proof that his ministry was needed for such a time as then

So, back to my original question: How do you react to hearing Jesus publicly proclaim who he is at the outset of his ministry?

How do we respond to the truth of who Jesus is and what he came to accomplish?

Do we, too, react in fear and chase him and his message away from us or do we take a moment to take stock – personally and communally – to allow the truth of his grace to set in?

Do we allow Jesus' message to require something of us and then do we follow through on those requirements?

Jesus didn't just come for such a time as then, he came for such a time as now, too

And in response to Jesus laying it out there for us to see and know so plainly and honestly who he is and what he came for, we can either respond by pushing away that truth and letting it rest at arm's length away – admiring the idea of Jesus' ministry, but not actually letting it change us – or, we can discern how the Spirit might just be calling and anointing us to publicly claim who we are

We are disciples of that Jesus the Christ

We are the inheritors of a ministry that anoints us, sends us, and compels us to “bring good news to every one of God's children who is bound up, pressed down, broken in spirit, impoverished, imprisoned, and desperately hungry for good news.”

We are the hands and feet and voices of a Messiah who came because God so loved the world, so loved the *world* and all the inhabitants of it with perhaps particular attention and care for those who have been thrust to the margins – trans, queer, non binary, immigrant, asylum seeker, sojourner, black, brown, indigenous, disabled, neurodivergent – because even tho the world might be ignoring your pain God does not and we will not either

We are the disciples of a Messiah who taught that the liberation of oppressed peoples and the honest reckoning and refiguring of the systems that oppressed them is at its

most basic a calling to believe all people are worthy of love and worthy of abundance – to honor the integrity of others the way God honors your integrity

Jesus, back in the day, came into the synagogue, rolled out the scroll, and publicly proclaimed “this is who I am”

Today, we are given the opportunity to come together in the four walls of this church to publicly proclaim who we are

We have our Annual Meeting today after the service – we roll out the scroll of our annual reports and publicly proclaim who we are as the followers of Jesus

And, we pray that the Spirit will come among us and anoint us to proclaim in word and action the ministries to which we are called in the year to come

And, what about you?

Jesus was called for such a time as then and now – as preaching professor Karoline Lewis asks in her commentary on this morning’s gospel: “What would be the words that could sum you up? How much are you willing to reveal about yourself, to the world, to others, even to yourself?”²

How are you praying the Spirit might anoint you in your life today and in the days to come to live out in word and action the discipleship to which you have been called?

I shared with some of our leaders this week, that my prayer for myself is that the Spirit might help me to be brave in my lane

I am not called to be a politician, I am not called to be a lawyer or a doctor

I am called to be a minister, I am called to be a parent, and a spouse, and a friend, I am called to be a citizen, I am called to be an advocate

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-luke-414-21>

And, I pray, that the Spirit will descend and anoint me, send me, and compel me to be a brave witness to the truths and callings of my God and my teacher, Jesus, in the lanes which God has called me to

Because if we're alive now, I think we are all called to be disciples in such a time as this, and if it feels right for you I pray that God will give you the strength to be brave in your lanes, too, whatever they may be

Jesus' inaugural address, his public proclamation of who he is and what his ministry will be, is grounded in the hope of our faith, rooted in the promises of our God, built on the foundation of a love for you and for me and for all people that is so immense and all-encompassing it truly is hard for us to grasp, and it is deeply unsettling

Perhaps our calling is to be a bit unsettled right now – because it means we're paying attention

And it means that we are trying, in the ways we know how and in the lanes the Spirit has given each of us, to align our hearts and our actions to Jesus' ministry and God's calling

Go fervently forward, the Spirit has anointed each of us for such a time as this.

Amen.