Jesus’ manifesto of hope (Luke 4) brings heaven down to earth, fulfilling Old Testament expectations, yet shocking his audience. When was the last time you preached a sermon that almost got you killed? This elective, led by Whitley faculty, gives you the opportunity to be open to God’s Word in an interactive Bible study.

1. **Painting the scene**

   Nazareth was a town in Galilee, a province north from Jerusalem, and near the Sea of Galilee.

   Today it is quite a large town, but at the time of Jesus, it was a small and quite insignificant town, on the side of a hill.

   Behind Nazareth there was a steep cliff, now called ‘Leaping Mountain’.

   Along with the Temple in Jerusalem as the central place of worship, in most cities and towns there were smaller synagogues where people gathered to listen to the scriptures being read. There they engaged in discussion and reflection about what the word of God was saying to them.

   Jesus came to the synagogue, in Nazareth: that’s the background to our reading for today:


   [See the translation by Keith Dyer at the end of this resource, along with comments on the text itself.]

3. **Faculty ‘discussion’**

   **ROSS LANGMEAD:**


   I love the way Luke builds up to this point. He begins with the birth of Jesus, his childhood, John the Baptist pointing to him, Jesus’ baptism and temptation in the desert—all these things lead to this huge moment when Jesus opens his public ministry with a manifesto in his home town.
I love it. Jesus picks his reading from Isaiah and then nails what he’s on about with astonishing claims. He’s anointed to bring good news to the poor. He will bring liberation to the captives—this is pure liberation theology! The blind will see and the oppressed will go free!

And it’s not a vague hope for the future. Jesus claims that this scripture has been fulfilled. God’s reign has been inaugurated. Towards the end of the chapter he expresses his sense of urgency: “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose” (4:42).

After this pivotal passage, the rest of Luke unpacks this message of joy, of good news particularly for those who are poor and outcast. Luke is my favourite Gospel.

This passage has guided me for most of my Christian journey. It reminds us that God’s kingdom is not a purely spiritual one but a mysterious transformation in which society is turned upside down. The Good News is news of justice and joy.

What else is there to say about a passage like this except that it's plain for all to see? What you see is what you get! We ought to get up now from our Bible study and get out there and alongside the poor, bringing the Good News!

MARK BRETT:

Mmm, “plain for all to see”. Yes, we Baptists do have a habit of seeing our practical faith as based on plain readings of scripture. But Luke 4 is a good illustration of the fact that Jesus interprets the scripture very differently from his audience. They don’t see his reading as plain at all; as soon as he starts to discuss the implications of Isaiah 61, his sermon is apparently so bad that he deserves immediate execution.

It’s interesting to notice exactly what was so offensive: Jesus recalls a couple of OT stories about foreigners in Elijah’s time who were the poor receiving food, and when sick receiving healing. So the people in the Nazareth synagogue were quite happy to hear about good news for the poor and the sick, as long as the focus was their own people who were poor and sick. Within our own congregation, we might say.

And what exactly is the “plain” meaning of Jesus’ claim that this scripture is “fulfilled”? What kind of fulfillment comes right at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry – before his teachings, healings, death and resurrection? And why does he reiterate the words of a prophet who, in the surrounding context of Isaiah’s preaching, is clearly speaking about the restoration of Jerusalem after Israel’s exile in Babylon?

What was the shape of this prophet’s ministry that Jesus is taking up? To proclaim, to bind up, to comfort, to provide – these are all actions that build towards the restoration of Zion/Jerusalem. Each of these verbs set up a chain of resonances with older texts, in particular, with texts from the legal tradition. This is not just a case of prediction and fulfillment, plain and simple.
“To proclaim liberty” refers back to the Jubilee year (Lev 25:10) when people return to their traditional lands, just as the exiles are now doing: returning to their traditional lands after their time of dispossession in Babylon.

But behind the Jubilee vision in Leviticus 25 lies also the broader tradition of releasing slaves in the Sabbatical year. Isaiah is picking up this tradition of older laws and applying their principles to his own day. And this is what Jesus is doing as well, perhaps implicitly taking up Isaiah’s concern for the foreigners who were being excluded in the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

KEITH DYER:

We note how assured Jesus is as he tells them that “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” — and he makes it explicit: “this scripture” that I just read — having stopped halfway through a sentence and dramatically closing the book (or rolling up the scroll) for good effect as he did so!

As Mark has already shown, this is not just a straightforward demonstration of “prediction and fulfillment” (Isaiah said it, and Jesus does it), but rather that Jesus interprets and fulfills the Isaiah tradition in a particular way — a way that is consistent with what he will soon say about loving enemies, in Luke 6:27.

For Jesus, the “acceptable year of the Lord” extends to foreigners and includes them — rather than wreaking vengeance on them — as Jesus makes even clearer in the provocative discussion that follows: “You want me to do ‘on my home-ground’ what I’ve been doing on the ‘away grounds’ — well I tell you, God’s always had better success out there. Look at Elijah . . . look at Elisha . . .”

Whatever home-ground advantage Jesus may have enjoyed evaporates at this point.

Not happy, Jesus.

“What about us?” they say. “Don’t we deserve some miracles, too? Look at the Herodians and their Roman overlords. Look at how they treat us. How can you turn your back on your own people?”

They’ve got a point, haven’t they?

MARITA MUNRO:

Did you know that John Calvin wrote over 3,000 words in his commentary on Luke 4:16-30?
He said that the poor refers to ‘the condition of all of us without Christ’. ‘Those to whom God promises restoration are called poor, broken, captives, blind, and bruised.

In his commentary on Isaiah 61:1-2, Luther wrote that Christ is a preacher to the poor and is sent to free us and help us, and this happens by the Word alone.’ His tasks are to heal the wounds of the brokenhearted (those crushed by the Law), those captive to sin, and those bound under sentence of death. ‘From these bonds Christ delivers us so that we may not be condemned by the Law.’ (Luther’s Works vol 17)

When the great 19th century British Baptist preacher and pastor, Charles Haddon Spurgeon preached on this text he said this: ‘The more poor you are, the more certain you may be that Christ came to enrich you! . You nobodies, you who have been turned upside down and emptied right out, you who are bankrupts and beggars—you who are utterly bad through and through and know it, and mourn it and are humbled about it—you may know that God has poured the holy oil without measure upon Christ on purpose that He might deal out mercy to such poor creatures as you are!’

Our business, since the Spirit of God is upon us, is not to teach politics . Our ethics must be drawn from the Cross—and begin and end there! (Metropolitan Chapel, 1894)

But other Baptist leaders refused to spiritualize this text. John Clifford, Walter Rauschenbusch and Martin Luther King Jr took the situation of the poor seriously. They sought to awaken the church to its social mission in which Kingdom values prevailed.

ROSLYN WRIGHT:

All very informative, I’m sure, but what does this mean for us here and now? If this was one of my students’ discussions, with all this lovely theological reflection, I’d be wanting them to tell me what this means for their ministry practice. I keep asking them: What is the pastoral and practical response that this theological reflection leads you to? What difference does this make to who you are and what you do?

I think it’s only fair that we all have to answer that as well. I’m sure the good folk out there listening to us would like to know too – what should we be doing? Ross wants us to get up and get out there with the poor, bringing the Good News. But that is only the first part of this passage – what does the rest of it suggest for us practically? – that the quality of our sermons is to be judged by how close we come to getting thrown off a cliff? Or thrown out of our church?

Jesus didn’t ever go back to Nazareth after this episode according to Luke’s account. Is burning our bridges a good ministry strategy? – doesn’t show much pastoral sensitivity to the crowd, or strategic planning.
I think we need to take a much deep look at the dynamics here – try and understand what is happening from a systems view. Maybe we could treat this like a case study and look at what is happening for each of the players in this scene – unpack it from the perspective of their issues, needs, interests and fears. Then we could begin to formulate a pastorally appropriate response – something practical. What are we going to do? How do we apply the whole of this passage to our lives?

FRANK REES:

Yes, I think this is really interesting for us all, as followers of Jesus. Who is this Jesus, in this story? Is he the meek and mild Jesus of my childhood in Sunday School? It doesn't really seem to fit: It's great that we have Jesus teaching from the Bible, but it's almost as if he actually instigates a fight.

As someone put it, his sermon almost gets him killed.

Am I a follower of this Jesus?

It's not just a manifesto of good news for the poor. The manifesto also has a hard edge. There is consolation here, but there is also confrontation.

So as we think about what this means for us, we will need to look at both parts of the story: the Good News, as it comes from Isaiah and in fact all the way back to the Jubilee teaching in Leviticus—that's one part of it, but we also have to take into account the way this text challenges its hearers. And some of them, maybe all of them, did not like what they heard. They preferred a different reading or a different interpretation.

So as we come to thinking about Jesus and his manifesto of hope, we need to get both sides of the story, both acts of the drama, and then we can think about how we apply this passage, or rather how the Spirit might apply this passage to us and for us...

So Keith can you help us see this passage within the whole of Luke’s story about Jesus:

KEITH DYER:

You have on your handouts some references to show how this manifesto (this reading and sermon of Jesus) is put into action through the rest of Luke’s story of Jesus. Note that Luke (twice as often as any other Gospel) highlights Jesus’ special concern for, and relationship with, the poor and destitute. The blind see again, the oppressed are set free, and release from (and forgiveness of) sin is experienced by many. As Ross said at the outset, this is what Jesus came for.

Sometimes it seems that in our preaching of the Good News we skip over this first part of the Gospel story and jump straight to the end, to emphasise that Jesus came to die for my sins, as an assurance of my salvation. In this way, the mission of God through Jesus for the whole world (especially ‘foreigners’) gets turned around again to be a mission mostly for us — for our spiritual well-being. It's almost as if we say, “Jesus, do here in our own home-town what we’ve heard you’ve done elsewhere ...” And of course Jesus can and does — after all, he’s been with us in Nazareth all along (and some still have faith there it seems) — but the question is, are we facing
outwards with welcoming arms, or are we turned inwards, with our backs to the world?

4. Discussion

1. When did the gospel mission get you, or someone you know, into trouble?
2. If your church chose Luke 4. 18 & 19 as its mission statement, what would its life look like?

5. Conclusion

Review of lessons from this process: The Bible itself is a conversation with God’s word in the past, coming into the present. We are invited to participate in this process, in fresh interpretation and applications: and this can be challenging. That’s why we need to do this together. That’s what makes us a Baptist church!
The text has been translated by Keith Dyer and prepared for dramatic reading.

[N] = narrator; [J] = Jesus; [A] = everyone


[J] 16 the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he anointed me
to announce good news to the poor
he has sent me to proclaim release* to the prisoners
and restored sight to the blind
to set free the oppressed by forgiveness*
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour . . . **

[N] 18 And closing the scroll, giving it back to the assistant, he sat down; and the eyes of all in
the synagogue were staring at him. 21 He began to say to them,

[J] “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears.”

[N] 22 And all were testifying to (or against) him and were amazed at the words of grace
coming out of his mouth and were saying: ***

[A] “Isn’t this the son of Joseph?”

[N] 23 and he said to them:

[J] “Truly, I am telling you that no prophet is acceptable in his own homeland. 25 In truth I am
saying to you, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah when the sky was shut for three
and a half years, when a great famine occurred upon all the earth, 16 and Elijah was sent to
none of them except to a widow in Zarephath of Sidon. 27 And many lepers were in Israel at
the time of Elijah the prophet, and none of them were cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

[N] 28 And all in the synagogue hearing these things were filled with rage 29 and rising up,
pushed him out of the city and led him as far as the edge of the mountain upon which the city
had been built so that they might throw him down the cliff; 30 but he — passing through the
midst of them — departed.

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** ‘Release’ and ‘forgiveness’ are the same word in Greek.

*** Note that Jesus does not go on to read ‘and the day of vengeance of our God’ (Is 61:2).

**** See the KJV, which is closer to the ambiguous Greek in this verse than other translations that emphasise
the positive response. The NRSV has: “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that
came from his mouth”, but it may make more sense if we see that the locals are already suspicious of Jesus
because he didn’t finish the Bible reading, stopping halfway through a sentence at the ‘words of grace’!
Note 1: We can see how well this ‘Nazareth manifesto’ expresses the mission and ministry of Jesus as described in the rest of Luke’s Gospel in the following references:

- The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (3:16,22, baptism . . .)
- because he anointed me (2:40; 3:22 . . .)
- to announce good news to the poor/destitute (6:20; 7:22; 14:13; 16:20 . . .)
- release to the captives (8:26–39 . . .)
- sight to the blind (7:21–22; 18:35–43 . . .)
- proclaiming Jubilee (year of the Lord’s favour) (1:46–55; 68–79; 2:29–32 . . .)

Note 2: Isaiah 61 reads as follows:

1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
*to bind up the brokenhearted,*
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;

2 to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favour,
*and the day of vengeance of our God;*
to comfort all who mourn;

3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. (NRSV, translated from the Hebrew).

The Septuagint (the Greek OT) includes “giving sight to the blind” in this passage, perhaps translated from an earlier Hebrew text. We don’t know which version Jesus (and/or Luke) would have had access to.

**Words & Phrases**

**v. 18:** The word usually translated as ‘poor’ really means ‘very poor’, ‘destitute’, ‘impovery’, ‘in a continual state of poverty’, and is an important part of Luke’s telling of the Gospel. See Lk 6:20; 7:22; 14:13,21; 16:20,22; 19:8; 21:3 — the ‘destitute’ occurs 10 times in Luke (compared with Mt 5, Mk 5, and Jn 4 times)!

**v. 18:** Twice in this verse we have the use of a word meaning ‘release’, ‘remission’, ‘forgiveness’. Luke also uses it in 1:77; 3:3; and 24:47, as well as the verb form in 5:20-1,23-4; 7:47-9; 11:4; 12:10; 17:3-4; and 23:34 (and in other places to mean ‘to leave’ or ‘permit’).

**v. 19:** The ‘year of the Lord’s favour/acceptance’ is a reference to the Jubilee traditions found in Leviticus 25 (and 27). Whether they were ever fully practised in Israel or not, they have remained a powerful biblical symbol of God’s justice returning to the people and to the land.

**v. 22:** ‘Testifying/witnessing to or against him’? ‘Words of grace’ or ‘gracious words’? This is a very ambiguous verse in the Greek text. Perhaps it represents the mixed response that Jesus received when he sat down before finishing the reading.

**v. 30:** Later tradition has Jesus leaping off the mountain in a miraculous escape! But these were the hills on which Jesus grew up — he didn’t need a miracle to get away.