HomeComing

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Luke 4:16-30

January 7, 2018
Charles Dickens was a highly acclaimed 19th century English novelist. Some of you may have watched or read portions of A Christmas Carol over the holidays. He wrote other well-known novels including A Tale of Two Cities and Oliver Twist. He was also a first-rate travel writer, who made several trips to the states. His enduring memory of Washington was the odious practice of Congressmen chewing and spitting tobacco. To my way of thinking, there is still a lot of spitting taking place on Capitol Hill. In an 1854 speech on travel to a London audience, he observed, “Every traveler has a home of his own and he comes to appreciate it the more from his wanderings.”

Our focus this year is the gospel of Luke. Over Christmas, we examined Jesus’ birth in the opening two chapters of Luke. In chapter 3, he leaves Nazareth to begin his public ministry where he submits to baptism by John in the Jordan River. In chapter 4, Jesus is tempted in the desert and travels north to Galilee to preach the kingdom of God and heal people. Luke reports the news about Jesus has been spreading like wildfire. Everybody seems to be talking about him (4:14-15).

Today’s lesson tells of Jesus’ homecoming. Jesus, who has now attained celebrity status, is coming home after his extended road trip.

Jesus enters the synagogue on the Sabbath, a custom he practiced with his family since childhood. He is given the honor of reading from the scroll of the
prophet Isaiah. (Books had not been invented yet.) He unravels the scroll to the 61st chapter and commences reading: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (4:18-19).

He finishes the reading, hands the scroll back to the attendant and sits down, the customary posture for preaching in those days. Luke tells us the eyes of everyone “were fastened on him.” Every eye was glued on Jesus, waiting for what he will say next.

Jesus’ opening for his sermon explodes in their ears: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21). Jesus claims personal fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Isaiah. It is an assertion of divinity, folks. Jesus announces he is the long-awaited Messiah who will inaugurate God’s new era of salvation.

People are understandably agitated, furious even. “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” They wonder where he has derived this insight and knowledge.

Jesus knows they are miffed that he did not begin his ministry in Nazareth. Why did he go to neighboring Capernaum with a high Gentile population? In the Middle
East, it is an unwritten rule, your first obligation is to family and your second is to your hometown.

Jesus cites a well-known proverb: “Surely you will quote the proverb to me, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum’” (4:23). The proverb, “Physician, heal yourself” is comparable to our saying “Charity begins at home.” Jesus drives his point home with a second, related proverb that no prophet is accepted in his own hometown (4:24).

Jesus defends his ministry to relative outsiders in Capernaum with two Old Testament stories. God sent the prophet Elijah to a poor widow, a pagan Gentile, no less (1 Kings 17). God also dispatched Elijah’s understudy, Elisha, to heal a foreign military officer of leprosy, who is, for the record, a Gentile also (2 Kings 5).

These two references to foreigners represent the last straw for his hometown. Mob rule breaks out. They carry Jesus out of town and attempt to throw him off a cliff. Somehow, Jesus eludes their grasp and lives to see another day.

Why does Luke tell this story first? My sense is that he brings it forward because it is emblematic of Jesus’ entire ministry. This story represents a game-changer. It sets the whole tone for everything that follows in Luke’s gospel. People initially greet Jesus with enthusiasm and curiosity. When he starts challenging their cherished religious institu-
tions and meddling in their personal lives, their enthusiasm gives way to suspicion and, eventually, to outright hostility. This story serves as a microcosm of Jesus’ life. It explains why Jesus ends up on a cross.

So, what difference does this sermon make in my life? Our goal in 2018 is to commit to three primary ambitions in this church: commit to the person of Christ, the body of Christ and the work of Christ in the world.

First, we commit to the person of Christ. I cannot think of a better way to begin this New Year than to commit or recommit your life to the person of Jesus Christ. We use the term “person” because Christ has personhood. He is not merely an idea or impersonal force. He is both knowable and relational.

We ask you, on a regular basis in this church, to read the Bible. We do not ask you to read it merely for information, so you can identify Nazareth on a map. We read the Bible for formation, so Christ’s teaching can be formed in our attitudes and behavior.

Committing to Jesus requires us to arrange our lives in such a way that we give serious attention to the Jesus-way in Scripture. That is why we are asking you to read Luke’s gospel with us over the next six months. This invitation is not only for the person seated next to you in the pew. Reading Luke’s gospel is something we are asking you to do. We will focus on one chapter each week and select one
representative story from that chapter to discuss in the Sunday sermon. We want our third graders to read the gospel of Luke with us this year. We are not giving them Bibles so they sit on a shelf. We want parents to read from Luke with your children. We distributed cards this morning to assist you in these daily readings. Those listening online can access this same information on our home page.

Second, we commit to the body of Christ. Jesus speaks of the church as his body, the extension of his ministry in the world. Some of you are all about Jesus but less than enthusiastic about his followers. I get it. Church people are deeply flawed. So is everybody else, for that matter.

Eighteen elders and nine staff directors from our church met on retreat this past weekend. We talked and prayed about how to engage more people in Christ’s ministry and mission in this church. We reflected on how engagement with Christ started in our lives. Every person told the same story. Transformation began in smaller settings, with trusted people who shared a mutual desire to grow in faith. While we regard corporate worship as indispensable to faith development, it is insufficient by itself to move the needle from nominal involvement to active engagement with Christ. One man confessed to being a Pew Potato for years (akin to a Couch Potato, I presume). Another woman spoke of hiding out as a Balcony Dweller, as she called it. We need other spiritual friends in smaller settings to encourage us and hold us accountable.
Third, we commit to the work of Christ in the world. This passage is ideal in this regard since it states emphatically what Jesus considers important. Is Jesus speaking literally or allegorically here? Are the poor economically disadvantaged or impoverished in soul? The answer is a decided yes on both counts. The good news of Jesus is for peoples’ bodies as well as their souls. There is danger in over-spiritualizing this passage. James wrote, “Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one says to them, ‘Go in peace, keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is that?” (2:15-16). Yet there is also a danger in the opposite direction, of making this passage all about feeding the poor while missing the deep longing in people’s hearts to hear the good news of Christ’s salvation.

This passage presents itself as a series of five infinitives. Infinitives function as auxiliary verbs to support the two primary verbs in verses 18-19, “anointed” and “sent.”

I already talked about the first infinitive, “to proclaim good news to the poor.” The Greek word for poor is a broad term encompassing spiritual as well as material poverty.

The second infinitive, “to proclaim release to the prisoners,” can refer to physical incarceration or to those held captive to sin in any number of ways—alcohol, drugs, pornography, success, self-image, you name it.

The third infinitive, “to proclaim recovery of sight to the blind.” can refer to those who are sightless or blind to the things of God.
The fourth infinitive, “to set the oppressed free,” refers to literal or figurative oppression. I have been thinking about this verse recently in relation to Christians persecuted for their faith in areas of the world hostile to Christianity, a story that often goes underreported by mainstream media.

The last infinitive, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” warrants a sermon in its own right. This phrase is reminiscent of the Old Testament Year of Jubilee practice (Leviticus 25). Every fifty years, God directs His people to release slaves, forgive debts and revert land to its original owners. Jesus, in effect, announces a new Jubilee era of salvation has commenced with his arrival.

In a sermon, Pastor John Piper challenged his people with regard to this passage to live for some great cause and not merely some great comfort. We follow Jesus not only for the comfort we derive from him. We also take up the cause of Christ: to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoner, sight for the blind, liberty for the oppressed and the year of the Lord’s favor.

I want to zero in on the first word in Jesus’ sermon, “today,” as in “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Some of you keep saying tomorrow. Tomorrow I will follow Jesus, when I’m older or settle down, when I raise my kids or finish out my career. I think of a Nike ad from a few years ago, “Yesterday you said tomorrow.” Today is the day and now is the time. Today, commit yourself to the person of Christ, the body of Christ and the work of Christ in the world.