

Proclaiming an Acceptable Year



Eleventh century fresco of the Exorcism at the Synagogue in Capernaum | Wiki Commons | PS-US

^{1:1} Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us, ³ I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received.

^{4:14} Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news of him spread throughout the whole region. ¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues and was praised by all. ¹⁶ He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read ¹⁷ and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: ¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.” ²⁰ Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him. ²¹ He said to them, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 1:1-4, 4:14-21)

Context

Here at the beginning of Ordinary Time in our reading of the gospels, we begin with the opening verses of the Gospel according to Luke. Its inclusion with the main body of the Sunday Gospel, is not for biblical scholarship or context, but it serves to emphasize *the certainty* of the story that follows. While many scholars note that it flawlessly follows the conventional form of prologues, it is surprising how little we are actually told. Unlike other gospels, it does not mention Jesus by name or title, gives no indication of the subject matter of the writing, does not name its sources, nor describe the scope of the writing. That

being said, Luke's concerns are more than historical (*orderly sequence*; more specifically, historical rhetoric). It promises to *compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us* that has been passed from the *eyewitnesses from the beginning and the ministers of the word* that handed the accounts onto Luke's generation (ca. 85 CE).

From that beginning we have followed Luke's *orderly sequence* through the annunciations of Jesus and John the Baptist, their births, the ministry of John, the baptism of Jesus, and his subsequent temptation in the desert. Our gospel passage then returns to Luke 4 – yet there are echoes of all that has gone before. The passage of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth is Luke's introduction to Jesus' public ministry – notably *in the power of the Spirit* (v.14). Just as Jesus' birth had been characterized by the movement of the Spirit (1:35), his baptism marked when the *holy Spirit descended upon him* (3:22), and he *was lead by the Spirit into the desert* (4:1), so too Jesus returns *to Galilee in the power of the Spirit*.

One thing that is evident when you look at this Gospel reading (4:14-21) is that the narrative really continues on to v.30. It is as though the story has been cut in half without knowing the reaction of the people in the synagogue. As it turns out Luke 4:22-30 comprise the Gospel reading for the following Sunday (4th Ordinary, C). Still, many Lucan scholars hold that the two halves together are key and make clear the four major points in Luke's account (*found in Stoffregen*):

- the announcement of Jesus ministry as the fulfillment of God's salvation-time,
- a statement about the content of Jesus' ministry based on the quotation from Isaiah,
- the foreshadowing of Jesus' final suffering and rejection,
- the foreshadowing of the movement of the gospel from Jew to Gentile.

Luke also uses geographical notices and reports of comings and goings to open and close sections of the narrative. Here we are witnessing the movement from the desert and the general surroundings of Galilee with his arrival in Nazareth and the events of this gospel. Very quickly Luke moves the scene to Capernaum (4:31-41) and we will see a pattern for Jesus' ministry:

- Jesus teaches (more often than preaches),
- In the synagogues (indicating that his first ministry is to the Jewish people)
- Reports about him spread because of his teaching, and
- He is glorified by all (and in later parts of Luke, also because of his miracles) - which is the only appropriate human response to God's disclosure of Jesus as the Savior

What Jesus does in Nazareth (4:16–30) and Capernaum (4:31–41) is typical of his work. “The rest of Luke 4 is carefully structured. Between the summary of Jesus' return to Galilee in 4:14–15 and the summary of his departure to Judea in 4:44, Luke summarizes Jesus' work in two villages: Nazareth (4:16–30) and Capernaum (4:31–41). In Nazareth, Jesus teaches in the synagogue; in Capernaum, while he is teaching, he casts out an unclean spirit and then heals Peter's mother-in-law and various others. Together, these scenes portray the power of the Spirit in both word and deed, in Jesus' teaching and in his healing. What he proclaimed in Nazareth, he began to do immediately thereafter in Capernaum.” [Culepper, 103]

Commentary

He came to Nazareth, where he had grown up, and went according to his custom into the synagogue on the sabbath day. He stood up to read¹⁷ and was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the passage where it was written: The Gospel of Mark has a similar account but records it later in Jesus' public ministry near the end of the ministry in Galilee (Mark 6:1-6a). Luke reports the account at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In doing so, Luke highlights the initial admiration (Luke 4:22) and subsequent rejection of Jesus (Luke 4:28-29) and presents it as a foreshadowing of the whole future

ministry of Jesus. Moreover, the rejection of Jesus in his own hometown hints at the greater rejection of him by Israel (Acts 13:46). Luke's account seems to have at least two emphases: (a) the announcement of Jesus' ministry as the fulfillment of God's promises from the OT in general, but in Isaiah in particular; and (b) a statement about the context of Jesus' ministry (*cf.* Luke 4:18-19). In each case, the prophet Isaiah serves as the fulfillment text.

Brief as it is, Luke's introduction to the ministry in Galilee gives the reader an indication of the nature of Jesus' work (teaching), one of its common settings (the synagogues), the source of its power (the Spirit), its result (praise), and its extent (to all).

In the Synagogue. The account of Jesus' return to his hometown embodies the gospel story in miniature. Jesus is met initially with praise and acclaim (*this week's gospel*), but this response sours through jealousy and suspicion until his own people are seeking his life (*next week's gospel*). As an observant Jew, Jesus customarily worshiped in the synagogue. Culpepper [105] offers insight into 1st century synagogue worship:

"Jesus stood to read, as was customary. He would then sit while he taught (4:20; 5:3). Although we do not know exactly what transpired in the worship of a Jewish synagogue of that time, the following elements seem to have been present: the Shema, recitation of the Decalogue, the eighteen benedictions, the reading of Scripture, the Psalms, the exposition, and the blessing. Various people might have been asked to lead in reading and praying. Luke reports only part of the event. The Hazzan, or assistant, would have handed Jesus the scroll. By the first century there was a fixed triennial cycle of readings from the Torah, but arguments that the readings from the Prophets were also fixed by this date are inconclusive. Presumably Jesus was able to read the Scriptures in Hebrew and then interpret them in Aramaic, as would have been customary. (The practice of giving a translation and exposition of the text can be traced to Neh 8:8.) There was usually more than one reader, and each was expected to read at least three verses. The readings from the prophets were probably chosen because they had substantial or linguistic affinities with the reading from the Torah. Luke's description of Jesus' finding the place where the verses quoted from Isaiah occur probably means that Luke understood that Jesus himself chose this passage."

No doubt word of Jesus' ministry and wondrous deeds has filtered back to his hometown. It would not be a stretch to imagine that the Sabbath worship would be a place where the people might expect Jesus to teach, share insight, and perhaps even to perform a mighty deed. "If Jesus would do this for strangers, surely he would do even more for us!"

First Words of Ministry. How appropriate that the first record of public ministry is the very living Word made flesh sharing the Word of God. Luke records these first spoken words of Jesus' ministry:

¹⁸ *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹ and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."*

What is recorded is not, per se, directly from one continuous citation of Isaiah. Luke 4:18-19 brings together in modified form verses from the Septuagint (LXX) version of Isa 61:1 and 58:6. Once more, the reader is given indications that Luke has carefully chosen and arranged elements of this account in order to tell the story in a particular way and express certain ideas to the reader. The Lukan modifications are shown in italics:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor
[Luke omits: *to bind up the brokenhearted.*]

He has sent me to proclaim liberty (release) to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, *to let the oppressed go free* [Isa 58:6], and *to proclaim* the year acceptable to the Lord.”

Significantly, Jesus does not go on to read the next phrase in Isa 61:2: “*and the day of vengeance of our God.*”

The text from Isaiah (61:1–2) is a promise of the restoration of Israel. The original context is the anointing of a prophet, but the figure of the promised Messiah, the kingly Anointed One, is also implied in Jesus’ usage of the text. He is the spirit-bearer foretold by Isaiah (Isa 11:2), the Prophet and Messiah who will usher in a new age of freedom and divine favor. The reference to an anointing by the Spirit is not a separate anointing from that given at Jesus’ baptism. It points to the baptismal anointing that was more than a single event; it is a state of being, a way of life. The first part of the Isaian quotation explains the significance of the Spirit and serves as a confirmation of Jesus’ authority when later we read of activities that illustrate Jesus’ fulfillment of the four phrases in this text (bring, proclaim, set free/release, and proclaim).

The unique feature of the Lucan account is the OT quotation itself (from Isa 61:1), which does not occur in the other Gospel accounts. Even though the idea of “fulfillment” is introduced by Jesus himself here (v. 21), Luke does not really present the OT passage as a prediction whose fulfillment offers proof or even witness of who Jesus is. Given the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is preceded by the baptism and the temptation narratives, the Isaian reference defines a particular role for Jesus and His ministry. The significance is not related to prophetic utterances as much as it demonstrates Jesus’ taking to himself the role of the servant described in Isaiah. This becomes an important aspect of what Luke understands to be the role of the church (developed in *Acts of the Apostles*)

In the power of the Spirit. As noted, this passage begins with a reference to Jesus being “*in the power of the Spirit.*” While there are no doubt some implicit Trinitarian ideas here, the OT should serve as the means of understanding the direction of Luke’s narrative. The OT metaphors of wind (Heb: *ruach* - breath, wind, spirit), smoke, and cloud, as well as fire, were ways of talking about the active presence of God in the world. Even though the single Hebrew term is translated in various ways even when used of God, this idea became a way to talk about God in terms of his immediate activity in the world. The idea behind the Hebrew term *ruach* expressed the immanence of God in the world and encompassed his willingness and power to act in human history. This idea carried over into most of the NT since the equivalent term in Greek (*pneuma*) carries the same varied meaning. As well, this “*power of the Spirit*” also points to a commissioning of prophets and enabling leaders to carry out their mission.

The reference to Spirit, then, is a way to express the active presence of God in the world, here specifically empowering Jesus for his task in the world. Just as the presence of God enabled the OT prophets to communicate a message, and as it empowered Israel’s leaders to carry out their responsibilities, so the active and immanent presence of God is with Jesus enabling him to carry out his task. It also stresses Jesus’ authority to proclaim whatever message he is to bring and whatever mission he will undertake, both defined here by the following Old Testament quotation (vv. 18-19). Luke will apply that same metaphor with the same meaning to the early church as it experiences the infilling of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Note the repetition of words in this short section: “he has sent” [*apostello*], to proclaim [*kerysso*] and release [or forgiveness; *aphesis*]. These two words (*apostello* and *kerysso*) are used in the commissioning of the disciples in Luke 9:2 who are then sent out in 10:13. Luke ends his gospel with Jesus telling the disciples “*that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached* [*kerusso*] *in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem*” (24:47). The *Acts of the Apostles* relates the disciples being sent out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, proclaiming the gospel. This is the teaching in the synagogue and sets the mission content and context for Jesus and his disciples.

The Poor, Captive, Blind and Oppressed. It is important to note that this mission is specifically directed at the needs of people: poor, captive, blind, oppressed. Significantly, Jesus' work will be good news to the poor. Mary's prayer (1:52-52; the Magnificat) praises the Lord for lifting up the lowly and sending the rich away empty. Later, Jesus announces God's blessing on the poor (6:20) and then refers to the fulfillment of the charge to bring good news to the poor in his response to John (7:22). The poor also figure more prominently in Jesus' teachings in Luke than in any other Gospel (14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; 21:3).

Culpepper [105-6] provides additional insights for Luke's use of the Isaian text:

The term used here for "captives" (αἰχμαλῶται *aichmalōtoi*) does not appear elsewhere in the NT, and elsewhere Luke uses the term "release" (ἄφεσις *aphesis*) only for forgiveness of sins, but various events later in Jesus' ministry can be understood as illustrating the fulfillment of this aspect of his commission. The word for "release" recurs in the line from Isa 58:6, inserted here by Luke: release for the oppressed. Jesus released persons from various forms of bondage and oppression: economic (the poor), physical (the lame, the crippled), political (the condemned), and demonic. Forgiveness of sin, therefore, can also be seen as a form of release from bondage to iniquity (Acts 8:22-23).

The restoration of sight to the blind was closely associated with the prophetic vision of the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel (Isa 35:5; 42:6-7). When Jesus restores sight to the blind (as he does in Luke 7:21-22; 18:35), he is figuratively fulfilling God's work of salvation as foreseen by the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is dramatically fulfilling the role of the one who would be a "light for the nations" (see 2:32; Acts 13:47). Like Jesus, his followers are to be light for others (Luke 8:16; 11:33).

The proclamation of the "year of the Lord's favor" in Isaiah 61 is connected with the Jubilee year legislation in Leviticus 25. Following a series of seven sevens, the fiftieth year was to be a time when "you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants" (Lev 25:10). It has occasionally been suggested that Jesus was actually proclaiming the observance of the Jubilee year through his reading of Isaiah 61, but this is far from certain. More likely is the interpretation that Jesus related the figure of "the year of the Lord's favor" to the kingdom of God (cf. Luke 4:43). Jesus' ministry signaled that the time for the liberation of the impoverished and oppressed had come, and in that respect at least his work would fulfill the ideal and the social concern of the Jubilee year.

The importance of the reading of Isaiah in this scene can scarcely be exaggerated. For Luke it proclaimed the fulfillment of Scripture and the hopes of Israel through Jesus' ministry as the Son of God. It stated the social concern that guided Jesus' work and allowed the reader to understand all that Jesus did as the fulfillment of his anointing by the Spirit. What Jesus understood by these verses, however, differed sharply from what those gathered in the synagogue assumed they meant.

Luke will continue to develop how that will work out in the real world as Jesus encounters these people in real life: lepers, tax collectors, women. It is a definition of the mission that called Israel, that called Jesus, and thereby calls his followers, to engage the world and its people and their needs as a way to fulfill being a light to that world. In every age people encounter the good news – and people often encounter the good news through their real and current needs.

God's story is always related to human need. For example, if a woman is dying of cancer, the gospel is God's strong word of resurrection. If a person is permeated with guilt, the gospel is God's assurance of forgiveness. If people experience extreme suffering, the gospel is the

prayer: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.” For the starving, the gospel may be bread. For a homeless refugee, the gospel may be freedom in a new homeland. For others, the gospel may be freedom from political tyranny. The gospel is always related to human need. It is never truth in a vacuum, a theologically true statement which may or may not relate to one's life. The gospel is God's truth, God's message, God's action, God's word to a particular person, to a particular need, to a particular historical situation. (Edward Markquart, *Witness for Christ* – found in Stoffregen)

As Spirit-filled as this gospel is, spiritual does not mean escaping the world.

Today. ²⁰ *Rolling up the scroll, he handed it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him.* ²¹ *He said to them, “Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing.”*

With the reading complete, Jesus takes the posture (sitting) of the teacher – as he was expected to do. All eyes are upon him, his reputation preceding, his choice of scripture provocative – *the eyes of all in the synagogue looked intently at him*. Then simply and powerfully Jesus tells them that this great promise of God given in Isaiah, this promise of the long awaited Messiah has been fulfilled.

It amounted to a declaration by Him that the words that He had read to them had finally come to fulfillment—in His own person. By this He really announced that He was the One anointed by God with the Spirit to proclaim the glad tidings to the poor. God had sent and empowered Him to fulfill all those signs promised through the prophet. And now Jesus stands among them *proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.* Jesus is announcing the Messianic age—the period ushered in by His appearance, in which God will grant His salvation to His people.

And the people respond to this great news Well, that is for next week.

Notes

4:14 in the power of the Spirit: Jesus' anointing / possession of the Spirit of God has been stated already in 3:22 (baptism) and 4:1 (temptation)

News of him spread: a Lucan theme; see Luke 4:37; 5:15; 7:17.

4:15 was praised by all: Jesus was making a circuit of the local communities before coming to his own home town. The term *doxazō* (praise) is used of a positive response to Jesus' work. The “all” will be in contrast to his townspeople's rejection of him.

4:16 according to his custom: Jesus' practice of regularly attending synagogue is carried on by the early Christians' practice of meeting in the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:12). Importantly Jesus carried on his parents' ethos (2:42) and

4:18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me: The context strongly suggests Jesus is referring to his baptism (3:21-38) As this incident develops, Jesus is portrayed as a prophet whose ministry is compared to that of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Prophetic anointings are known in first-century Palestinian Judaism from the Qumran literature that speaks of prophets as God's anointed ones.

to bring glad tidings to the poor: more than any other gospel writer Luke is concerned with Jesus' attitude toward the economically and socially poor (see Luke 6:20, 24; 12:16-21; 14:12-14; 16:19-26; 19:8). At times, the poor in Luke's gospel are associated with the downtrodden, the oppressed and afflicted, the forgotten and the neglected (Luke 4:18; 6:20-22; 7:22; 14:12-14), and it is they who accept Jesus' message of salvation.

4:19 liberty to captives...oppressed go free: *aphesis*, Luke uses this word five times. Three of those are part of the phrase “forgiveness of sins” (1:77; 3:3; 24:47). The other two times are in the above quote. The quote suggests that for Luke, forgiveness is more than just saying “sins are forgiven”. It includes releasing. Some hold that the translation (release or forgiveness) hinges on linking another significant word, *apostello* – “to send” (from which we get “apostle”), which also occurs twice. Jesus reports that he has been sent (*apestalken*) to proclaim and then says that he is sending (*apostelai*) the broken/shattered in forgiveness. It is plausible and quite interesting, particularly if you link the final phrase so that it reads “sent the broken in forgiveness (*ev aphesei*) to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

a year (*eniautos*) acceptable to the Lord: Is the “acceptable year of the Lord” a reference to the Jubilee Year in Leviticus 25? It is not clear that Luke intends this connection. This word for “year” (*eniautos*) occurs frequently in the LXX of Leviticus, but another Greek word for “year” (*etos*) occurs even more often in chapter 25. While these two Greek words can mean a calendar year, which they likely mean in Lv 25; it is perhaps not the intended meaning in this quote from Isaiah. In fact and in history Jesus did not limit his ministry and the “acceptable year” to a 12 month period. The word *eniautos* can refer to a more general period of time, a indefinite period of time. With this definition it might be translated “age” (although probably a shorter period than *aion*), “era,” or “time.” Jesus is ushering a new era that has a limited time-span -- not as long as *aion* = “age,” “eternity”. This “era” may be the short period of time of Jesus' earthly ministry, but more likely, it is the period of time that begins with Jesus' ministry and extends until Jesus' return. There is a point when this “acceptable era” is replaced by something else.

4:21 Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing: this sermon inaugurates the time of fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Luke presents the ministry of Jesus as fulfilling Old Testament hopes and expectations (Luke 7:22); for Luke, even Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection are done in fulfillment of the scriptures (Luke 24:25-27, 44-46; Acts 3:18).

today: Today is an important word for Luke. It occurs 12 times in Luke and only 9 times in the other three gospels combined. It occurs in such familiar passages as: “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you.” “Today you will be with me in paradise.” And twice in the Zacchaeus story: “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay in your house today.” And, “Today, salvation has come to this house.” And in our text: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” For Luke today is a moment of radical change.

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