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Commentary on Luke 4:14-21

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David Schnasa Jacobsen
Luke 4:14-21
1/27/2019 Third Sunday after the Epiphany

This lection reminded me of a book title from a few years back: *Good News is Bad News is Good News*. Our pericope for this week is certainly about the good news in connection with Jesus as he preaches his first home-town sermon in Nazareth. True enough! But like a lot of good news, there's often a little bad news lurking quietly underneath. Perhaps Luther was not too far off, the gospel is *kakevangelium* before it is *evangelium*.

Given the happy description of Jesus' Galilean ministry in 4:14-15, it takes some work to discern the hidden bad news. But when someone announces that you've been healed, it presupposes you had something you needed to be healed from. If someone says, "you're forgiven," it doesn't make sense unless you needed something to be forgiven for. Good news is bad news is good news.

With the story of Jesus in Luke 4, however, this reality gets even more complicated as the Nazareth synagogue sermon continues. The issue for us is not just about North American middle-class individual good news or bad news, but the ancient world's corporate variety. Jesus shows up in his home town synagogue in good pious fashion: he attends on the Sabbath as was his custom, he had been brought up locally, and ultimately he stands up as a now famous figure to read the text for the day—this Jesus is a devoted local boy who turned out well (Luke 2:52). But the words Jesus reads are those of the great prophet, Isaiah. And Isaiah moves quickly from the singular of character to the plural good news of shared public life and justice: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and has anointed me." But this Spirit is calling the singular anointed one to attend to the plural reality: to preach good news **to the poor**, release to **prisoners**, sight for **the blind**, and relief for **those who are downtrodden**. The final part is reminiscent of the year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25: "and to proclaim the year of Lord's favor." All of those plural nouns only bring out the theological complexity of the moment: good news for the poor may mean bad news for the non-poor. Indeed, the jubilee year of the Lord's favor sounds great if you need the redistribution of now alienated ancestral lands, but if you have amassed someone else's land—not so much. Now we see the same gospel problem at a whole new, corporate level: good news is bad news is good news.

But add to this synagogue scene one final layer of complexity: the word of *Jesus* is where all this news meets today. And the person of Jesus is the very place where Luke stakes his story of the Gospel. It is Jesus who reads this amalgam of Isaianic texts (61:1; 58:6; 61:2), closes the scroll, hands it to the attendant, and sits down—did you catch that, *sits down*? Jesus sits to teach, to exposit his text, as it were, as a preacher in the midst of the messiness of traditions, a jumble of received practices, and all the local particularities of a Jewish synagogue worship tradition that until 70 CE ran alongside the central Temple rites, but would afterward stand at the center of rabbinic Judaism.

But what Jesus says practically cracks open the traditions with a brazen speech-act: his is a word that does something, "today this text has been fulfilled in your hearing." He's not so much

giving information in a lecture as he is announcing an emancipation or proclaiming an amnesty—the kind of word that changes things. The key term in his announcement is an eschatological word—today! In his person, in this moment in a Galilean synagogue, in this word a divine future is dawning today.

Yet the trick is this: one has to be open enough to hear this news from Jesus lips to your ears. And this is precisely what makes good news, bad news, and yet good news. This Jesus who by Spirit and anointing announces the fulfillment of the prophet's dream *today*, is nonetheless always being accepted and rejected, celebrated and vilified in the Lukan narrative. This is all part of Luke's more tragic vision of Jesus' good news. Luke is no theologian of glory, but in his own way a narrative theologian of the cross.ⁱ Just as Simeon pointed out in Luke 2:35, Jesus is set for the falling and rising of many. Unfortunately, this justice vision is not ever going to pass by acclamation—"of course, *everybody* is for justice!" It will rather be both graciously given and practically hard-won. Through this person, Jesus, on this day, in this place of worship. Good news is bad news is good news. O, people of God, may it be so. Let the struggle begin.

I work at a theological seminary where this Lukan text is set in stained glass in a stairwell. It is a beautiful, broken-glass vision of God's messianic purposes for grace and justice in Jesus. We at Boston University School of Theology tend to resonate with that vision because we aspire to be a *schola prophetarum*, a "school for the prophets." Yet if you are a student with a disability or a faculty person of color, you may be all too aware that the vision both graces and challenges the seminary community which professes to place its hope in it. We see the stained-glass vision of Luke 4 through our own prisms of privilege and intersectionality in it every day as we move up and down in this place of theological learning: indeed, good news is bad news *is good news*.

David Schnasa Jacobsen is Professor of the Practice of Homiletics and Director of the Homiletical Theology Project at Boston University School of Theology. He has helped author *Preaching Luke-Acts* (Abingdon, 2001), *New Proclamation: Year C, 2007, Easter through Christ the King* (Fortress, 2006), as well as the Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentary Series on *Mark* (Fortress, 2014).

ⁱ My co-author, Dr. Günter Wasserberg, and I treat this in our book, *Preaching Luke-Acts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).