

“Anointed to Bring Good News”

Sermon: Year C, Epiphany 3

Texts: Luke 4:14–21, 1 Corinthians 12:12–31a

Preached January 27, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, Illinois

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN

Did you follow the kerfuffle this week about the State of the Union address? There was a lot of very public back-and-forthing and tit-for-tatting about whether the speech was going to be given, and where it was to be given. President Trump and Speaker Pelosi were locked in a battle over that speech. To be honest, it turns out that the State of the Union address throughout much of our history wasn't even a speech, and pretty universally, State of the Union speeches have yielded precious few memorable lines that have been remembered by history, anyway, so I'm not sure what all the hype was about. If you want soaring oratory, stirring words, you have to look to the Inaugural Address. I always look forward to the speech that the new president, or returning president, delivers to the people of this country right after that person has been invested with the powers of the office ... the closest we Americans come to anointing someone as king or queen. There's always a sense of this speech as something historic, something people might quote in centuries to come. As we listen to these speeches, there's an expectation that the new president is going to lay out a vision for our collective future in soul-stirring words, uplifting words. And there's an expectation that something is going to be demanded of us as a people—usually a call to work together toward the goals of that vision we're hearing about, a call to sacrifice ourselves, our labor, our time, and yes, usually our money as well.

Some of the most powerful oratory in our history has come from inaugural addresses. There's Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Or John F. Kennedy's speech:

Now the trumpet summons us again—not as a call to bear arms, though arms we need; not as a call to battle, though embattled we are—but a call to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, “rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation”—a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease, and war itself. [...] The energy, the faith, the devotion which we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it—and the glow from that fire can truly light the world. And so, my fellow Americans: Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

Last Monday was also a day on which we remembered and honored Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who in that same city gave what amounted to his inaugural address, his “I Have a Dream” speech, by which he was in effect anointed as leader of the civil rights movement for African-American citizens. He quoted the words of the prophets Amos and Isaiah as he outlined a vision of a future in which racial prejudice would be shattered:

...[We] will not be satisfied until “justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” [...] I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; “and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: *Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*

Those are soul-stirring words, aren't they? They're words that call us to live up to our highest calling, to move into action, to come together and strive together to bring about a vision of a future full of hope and promise. And interestingly, every one of those speeches borrows from the words of the biblical prophets to call us back to the vision. There are scripture references everywhere in those speeches.

In today's Gospel reading, you might say that Jesus is giving his inaugural address. It may not be obvious, but that's what it is. He has just come from his baptism, where God's own Spirit anoints him as God's beloved Son. He has been in the wilderness where he was tested by Satan. And now he has begun moving around the Galilee region, preaching and teaching in the synagogues in the various towns he visits. In Nazareth, where he grew up, he attends the synagogue service and is invited to read a portion of scripture from the Prophet Isaiah and to preach on it. Now, when it says "he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down," that doesn't mean he was through. Quite the contrary. In those days, rabbis sat down to teach. So when Jesus sits down, he's not done, he's just getting started. He begins his sermon with a startling statement: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." We Christians hear that as the audacious claim that the prophet's words have come to pass ... that Jesus, himself, is the one God has anointed to do these things—that he is in fact the Messiah, the Anointed One of God. We don't have the rest of the sermon, but it must have been stirring, because the Gospel goes on to say, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." We can guess that Jesus went on to spell out this amazing vision of good news for the poor, release for captives, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and he announces the amazing good news that this new era of God's loving favor has now arrived.

Those words still have power to stir our souls, don't they? We hear them, and our hearts are thankful for the ways in which Jesus Christ has brought us Good News, has healed us and released us from the things that have kept us captive, has shown us God's love and favor. We hear these words very personally, individually. We hear Jesus' assertion that he has been anointed by God to do these things, and we hear that as a unique statement about Jesus. I saw a cartoon once about this passage, with two sheep talking to one another about the "job description" Jesus gives. One of the sheep says, "Well, everybody knows he only got hired because he's the boss's son."

But like any good inaugural address, Jesus is not talking only about himself. He's talking to us, and about us. While we are not *the* anointed one, we, too are the Boss's children, we, too, have had the Spirit of God rest upon us in the anointing of our baptism. We, also, not only Jesus, have been anointed to bring good news to the poor. God has anointed *us* to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight for the blind. God has given *us* the responsibility to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim to a hungry world that the new era of God's love and blessing for all of humankind is breaking in as we speak. But as Bp. Desmond Tutu says, "The Good News to a hungry person is bread." Christ is calling us to concrete action, he's stirring us to be something higher, to come together to do amazing things, to have a vision for a future filled with hope for people who are despairing, who have lost hope. These words are at the very core of what Jesus wants to teach us, at the very heart of what he is calling us to do and to be. This is the vision that has spurred God's people to action across the millennia, the soul-stirring vision that has drawn people to Christ and to the church.

Pastor Don Carlson puts it this way:

I am convinced that few, if any, people joined the early Christian community because they were attracted by some new abstract theology. Nor do I think they were looking for a way to get their sins forgiven so that they could get into heaven. I think that they were attracted by a new way of living with others in this world. They were attracted by a new dispensation and new way of doing life with others in Jesus' name; a way of life together that brought hope and healing amid the brokenness and injustice that sin had wrought. They joined because, amidst the old tottering kingdoms of the world, they glimpsed in Jesus and his followers that the kingdom of God was at hand. Concrete, down to earth, in the flesh, everyday Good News.

That is still what we are called to today—you, me, every one of us. We are called to help bring about that promise-filled, hopeful future that the prophets and Jesus paint with their words, and not just in Pollyannaish platitudes about how wonderful things will someday be in heaven, but in real, concrete actions in our world for the good of our neighbors and for the building up of the peaceable and just Reign of God here and now. You may say, "Pastor, there's no way I can do all those things by myself." Of course not, you're absolutely right. We can't do it by ourselves. But that's why God has placed us here in community, has made us one body with many members, and has given you the particular set of gifts that you have been gifted with. You and I each have a role to play in bringing to reality, in putting flesh on, this vision of how the world will be. This is our calling, our duty. I leave you with these questions: What are we as the body of Christ at Immanuel doing to bring about this vision? What are the things we will do this year to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free? How will we, through our words and actions, proclaim the Good News of God's love and grace, and the year of the Lord's favor? AMEN