

The Long Shot
Luke 4:16-30

January 24, 2016

3rd Sunday After the Epiphany

Football fans are getting excited. The highest and most holy day on the sporting calendar is fast approaching: Super Bowl Sunday. Most often the opponents in that game are well matched and the game is good. That should prove to be the case this year. Such was not the case 47 years ago as I reminded of by something I heard on the radio last week. In 1969, the then *Baltimore* Colts of the National Football League played the upstart New York Jets of the old American Football League. Everyone thought Baltimore with Johnny Unitas would easily beat New York by a wide margin. A victory by the Jets would certainly be a long shot. But the Jets had a brash young quarterback by the name of Joe Namath. In interviews, Joe did not just hope for a good game or say that his team would try hard against the mighty Colts. Joe did not much more. He guaranteed that New York would beat Baltimore. Most people heard that and laughed. There was no way that such a prediction could come true. Yet it happened. New York defeated Baltimore 16-9. Joe's wild prediction came true.

Many years ago, our Lord Jesus Christ did something similar. One day, Jesus went back to His home town, Nazareth. He went to the local synagogue according to His custom. People all over the area had heard Jesus teach and preach. Now, the home folks had the opportunity to do the same. Jesus received the scroll of the famous prophet, Isaiah. Jesus began to read from that scroll, "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 liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Isaiah was writing about the Messiah who was promised by God a long time ago. The Messiah would come with the Spirit's power. He would proclaim good news to poor people and freedom for people who were captive. He would give sight to the blind, free the oppressed, and proclaim the time for God to save people. Who are these poor, blind, oppressed, captive people? These represent those who are spiritually poor, blind to God's will, oppressed by the devil, and

captive to sin, death and hell. The prophet says that the Messiah would come to enrich the poor with the Word of the Lord; open the eyes of the people so they could see the will of God, defeat Satan, free people from sin death and hell, and bring them back to God.

Jesus finished reading the lesson, rolled up the scroll, and gave it back to the attendant. Then he sat down to explain the text. Most Jewish rabbis, after reading this text, would talk about the future and what the Messiah would do when he arrived. Jesus was different. Jesus said, “*Today* this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” What did He mean? This is more than a liturgical response – like when the pastor says, “This is the Word of the Lord” and the congregation responds, “Thanks be to God.” Jesus is saying something much more important, much more profound, much more astounding. Jesus was saying God was keeping His promise now. The Messiah *had* come and that He – Jesus from the tiny town of Nazareth – was the Messiah.

What did the people think? Probably in much the same way people would think if I declared myself to be the Messiah. The text says, “And all spoke well of him and marveled at the gracious words that were coming from his mouth. And they said, ‘Is not this Joseph's son?’” In other words, they thought He spoke nicely, but they didn't really believe Him. They said, “This is Joseph's son. We know him. He grew up here. How could he be the Messiah?”

I suppose that was natural. It is very easy for a person to call himself the Messiah. It is more difficult for him to actually do the work prophesied about the Messiah. So, during His ministry on earth, Jesus proclaimed Good News to the poor. He freed people who captive to Satan by casting on demons. He restored sight people to blind people. In addition to helping those people, Jesus was showing the people that He was the Messiah foretold by the prophets.

Later on in the book of Isaiah, the prophet describes the most important work of the Messiah: “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like

sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:4-6)

This predicts a Messiah who would not rule and conquer for personal glory (as some hoped the Messiah would do), but who would suffer and die for the sins of all people. Jesus did just that. He bore the griefs and sorrows of the people. He had the iniquity of all people laid by the Lord upon Him. He was pierced, crushed, and punished for the sins of all through a horrible death on a cross.

But His wounds serve a useful purpose. He freed those stuck in sin. He helped people blinded because of their iniquities to see God. He freed those who were oppressed by the devil. All of this happened because of His death on the cross. He even rose from the dead and became alive again to prove it and to guarantee it.

Those people are us. We have been freed from sin and punishment. We who were blind to God and His ways now see Him by faith and believe in Him. We who were oppressed by the devil are free. We have had our sins forgiven. We are united with God and belong to Him. That's wonderful!

Yet, some people will say, "That's nice, but we've got real problems in our world today. How does that tie in to now?" It is true. There are great problems today. There have been fires, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and tornadoes. There have been terrorist attacks and ISIS appears strong. The stock market is plummeting and the economy suffers. Christians are being persecuted and many people are turning away from the true God and following false religions. Those things bother us, worry us, and frighten us.

However, the Bible makes another Messianic prophesy: when those bad things happen, the Messiah will come again. Jesus said that when there are wars, earthquakes, false religions, persecution, and the like - that is only the beginning of our suffering. There will be yet more problems and then, suddenly, He will come quickly. He will gather all of His people, free them from this evil world and all the problems in it, and bring them to eternal bliss in heaven with Him.

Many people today are just like the people in Nazareth during the time Jesus lived on earth: they disbelieve that. Maybe it's because they are so focused in on the problems and difficulties of the present day. Maybe it's because they just can't believe that the Son of God will come from heaven again. Even some Christians get caught up in problems and doubt whether Jesus will ever come back again.

But, remember: Jesus once before claimed to be the Messiah and successfully fulfilled Messianic prophecies. He can and will do it again. We can be sure of that. God's Word does not lie nor does Jesus. What does that mean for our life? It means we can lead peaceful lives without guilt or fear of God because of Jesus' first work as Messiah. Our sins have been forgiven. We have peace with God. There is now no condemnation for us who are trust in Christ Jesus. We have only His love, mercy, and support. We have eternal life in heaven guaranteed to us as our inheritance.

It also means that we can continue to live boldly, without fear, in the midst of all the problems in this world because of Jesus' second work as Messiah. These problems in the world are very real. There is no doubt about that. These sufferings can hurt us, frustrate us, and disappoint us, but they cannot defeat us. Jesus will come again and rescue us from this world and all of its evil and problems. He will bring us to be with Him in heaven where there will be no more pain, sadness, or suffering.

Remember again that we are presently in the season of Epiphany on the church calendar. The word, "epiphany" means "to show". Today, we remember that Jesus has shown Himself to be the Messiah who fulfills Messianic prophecies. Many years ago, Jesus showed Himself to be the humble Savior who bled and died on the cross for your sins, my sins, and the sins of the entire world. Sometime in the future, Jesus will return and show Himself to be the mighty Savior Who will rescue His people and bring them to heaven. So, as you leave today and live in the "real" world, trust in what has happened in the past; hope for what will happen in the future; and you will be saved. That's not a long shot. That's a sure thing. Amen.