

Luke 4: 14-21 Jesus' Inaugural Address

I must admit that I had never before associated this passage with the phrase inaugural address until reading a commentary by Dr. David Lose. He began with a reference to the State of the Union address recently given by the president. In his comments on some of the characteristics of an inaugural address he made a connection that in Luke this was the first indication by Jesus of his agenda. My primary association with that phrase inaugural address has always been with the speech given by our newly inaugurated president after taking the oath of office. This speech is usually a somewhat idealistic and ambitious declaration of the hopes of that individual; hopes for the implementation of the program which was the basis his election. That commentary got me to thinking about how Luke's text resembles that type of address. For the incoming president it is his first address to the nation after taking office. In Luke for Jesus this is his first declaration about what he has come to do. In the gospel accounts of Jesus there are many things that are similar, especially if you look only at Matthew, Mark and Luke. The same events often appear, but the order in which they appear is different. As we found in the passage from John last week, although Jesus' attendance at the wedding in Cana is unique to that gospel, it was only one of the many things John knew about Jesus. At the end of John's gospel he tells us there were so many things he could say that the world could not hold them all. So he has recounted the ones most important to the revelation which Jesus brought about God and God's nature. The wedding at Cana was the one John said was the first action Jesus had done which revealed who he was. Each gospel account has one event which is used to describe the first action of Jesus which reveals to others that he is the Christ—even if that was not understood at the time by those present. Today we have read what Luke considers Jesus' first revelation of who he is. In the liturgical year we are still in the season of epiphany—the time of revelation. This text is meant to continue the revelation we had from the gospel of John last week. This passage contains the first words of Jesus himself in the public arena as Luke chooses to record them. Like a president's inaugural address is used to announce the priorities of his term of office, Jesus chooses to announce his priorities. Just like the president's address, Jesus' speech is about more than priorities. It's also a vision for what can and should be. So what is this first announcement of Jesus? What do we hear in this address? It is an announcement of his mission. It is a description of the kingdom of God. It is a promise of God's aid and presence. And all of this is summarized by the words "good news". Luke begins his gospel account with the promise that he had gathered all the information about Jesus which he is now using to present an orderly account of Jesus' life and ministry. Before today's passage, Luke's orderly account tells us that Jesus has been baptized by John in the Jordan. After the baptism while Jesus is praying, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon him while a voice declared "You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased." In Luke, this is a private communication between God and Jesus. After this declaration, Luke tells us the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where he spent forty days without nourishment. While there he is approached by the devil and tested with promises of food, wealth and power. Jesus answered all these temptations with the scriptures of his heritage. In doing so he affirms his allegiance to God's ways and purpose. Luke also tells us that the devil then departed from him but only until an opportune time. In this background to the beginning of Jesus' ministry, we gain the picture of Jesus' humanity—he was tempted to use his divine nature and

relationship with God in ways which did not align with God's purpose. Despite the temptation, he remained committed to the goal for which he came. This summary fills in the background for the story Luke is telling. It also shows us what about the stories of Jesus he will record that is important to him. The presence and power of the Holy Spirit has been with Jesus in each of these events recounted. Jesus' knowledge of God's previous revelations forms an integral portion of the choices and teaching Jesus will bring to the people. Our passage for today begins, "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone." If we look carefully at this text we understand that Jesus has already been going about the Galilean countryside since a report about him and his actions is already spreading. Although not mentioned here, it's hard to imagine those servants at the wedding in Cana would keep quiet about what happened. Jesus left Cana and went to Capernaum with his family and disciples according to John's gospel. Capernaum is a place which features early in Matthew and Mark as the location for many of the early events in Jesus' ministry, including healing the sick and casting out demons as well as teaching. Mark tells us without detail that while going around the countryside, Jesus was proclaiming the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near." (Mark 1:14) Some of these events described in Mark and Matthew may be the content of the report which has reached the citizens of Nazareth. For whatever reason, Luke tells us of Jesus' return to his hometown of Nazareth as the first event of note in the revelation that God's kingdom has come near. Again in this passage we are reminded that Jesus was a devout man. When he gets to his hometown and it is the Sabbath day, he goes "as was his custom to the synagogue." The synagogues were a feature of the faithful Jewish life after the return from Babylon. Although the Temple was still the major focus of the rituals of the faith, their time in exile had meant that they had to find other ways to continue their tradition. In our passage from Nehemiah today we heard how the scripture was read to the people after their return. It was then interpreted by the Levites. On that day Ezra read from the law from early morning until midday. That sequence of reading scripture and then interpretation should sound very familiar as it is a central part of our worship today. Although sermons in the 1700's often lasted several hours our service doesn't last quite that long. In Jesus' time the reading from scripture included the Law and the prophets which were read in their entirety in a specified cycle, which might be compared to our lectionary readings. So when Jesus came into the synagogue what happened was the normal course of events. He stood up to read from scripture and was given a scroll to read. The scroll given to him was from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus then found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." If you are curious you can find this passage in Isaiah 61. What Jesus taught was based on what they knew of God, but like the prophets before him, Jesus was revealing God's purpose as he taught. So on this Sabbath day in his hometown when Jesus goes into the synagogue and takes the scroll, the listeners hear what has been proclaimed before. After reading from the scroll, Jesus sits down and with all eyes upon him makes the bold statement that "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." This is Jesus' announcement about what he has come to do. This ends our text for today, although it is not the end of the encounter in Nazareth. The subsequent events cause this passage in its entirety

to be termed the rejection of Jesus in Nazareth. But let's look more closely at what Jesus has declared as his mission statement. With the Isaiah passage Jesus' claim is that he has been sent or anointed by the Lord to do certain things. Luke opens the passage saying that Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit. Yet none of those mentioned as the subject of Jesus' agenda were powerful. Jesus is bringing good news to the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. These are the outcasts, then and now. Yet Jesus is saying that he came for them. All of this challenges our typical notions of power and the concern of the powerful—at least the power of the Holy Spirit. The power of God is demonstrated not by accomplishments or attributes one claims for one's own self but only through what it accomplishes for others. Power is only power when it sets others free, only when it builds up others, only when used for the betterment of those around you. This first sermon of Jesus in Luke is all about what God will do for the least of those in the world. It tells us that God gives special attention to those whom the world does not want to see. It tells us that God sees all, loves all, and intends and promises to redeem all. It also means that God sees the parts of us that we don't want seen; the parts that are ugly and unlovable. Yet God loves us anyway. It is good news indeed. But it is also a challenge because it means within that umbrella are those we might not want to see or think should be included. Yet as Paul reminds us in the passage from 1 Corinthians, we are all given gifts which have one purpose—to serve the Lord and build up the body of Christ. In Jesus' inaugural address hope and comfort is given to all because even the lowliest and those most outside of society are claimed. In Jesus' inaugural address a vision of the reign of God is described. We can give thanks for both. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.