

Free and Costly

We name the four narratives about Jesus of Nazareth the gospels—probably coming from the opening of Mark’s narrative which states that what he writes is “the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark’s was the first written account about Jesus, his life of ministry which told illustrated the mission he proclaimed he was sent to tell the people: the kingdom God is near. This written record did not appear for 60-90 years after Jesus’ life was over. The Greek word for “good news” was gospel, and throughout the each of the narratives the message is that Jesus brought good news to those with whom he interacted. The message about God sending good news appeared in the Hebrew Scriptures as well. In fact our reading from Luke this morning is about what the good news is. Today’s passage from the 4th chapter of Luke comes just after Jesus’ forty days spent in the wilderness and his encounters with the devil. Jesus returns to Galilee from this experience “filled with the power of the Holy Spirit” according to Luke. He begins speaking and teaching in the synagogues as he makes his way back to the place where he was raised. In each gospel, Jesus is found in synagogues on the Sabbath day. On the particular day narrated in this passage, when Jesus goes into his hometown synagogue he stands up to read from a scroll which is handed to him; the scroll being that of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls the scroll and selects the verses he wishes to read; verses that announce who he is and what he has come to do. Luke 4: 18-19—“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.” Each gospel writer chose a different entry point for their narrative; John’s gospel begins with a unique event: the turning of water into wine at a wedding in Galilean village of Cana. John describes this as a sign of Jesus’ identity done in an obscure location where few even knew it had happened. Only Jesus, his mother and the four disciples he had chosen at that point. But this sign caused those disciples to believe. The proclamation that Luke uses to introduce Jesus’ purpose to us is also an identifier; made publicly which highlights the content of the good news being brought. This content’s importance as the first announcement by Jesus himself of who he is and what he came to declare is just the beginning of the theme found in Luke. It also identifies to whom the news is sent—the poor, the captives, the disabled blind, and those enduring oppression. This passage gives Jesus’ priorities about what he has come to do. Much of Luke’s narrative continues this theme of ministry to the least, the lost, and the last. In addition to being a list of his priorities, this is passage gives us insight into the vision God has for humanity—a vision which will give abundant life to all those who are now struggling. What Jesus is giving to people through his life and ministry is a vision of what God’s reign will look like; a vision for what could and should be available if we but followed God’s guidance. That God’s reign is near is thus best described as good news. If you listen closely you might hear what we rarely focus on: this good news is only good news if you are willing to admit to what is hard in your life, what is lacking, what has been most difficult. This proclamation is not a message of “good news” in general; it is not good news for everyone. Rather it is good news for the poor. It is not just release, but release to those who are captive, sight to those who are blind, freedom for those who are oppressed. God’s message is designed to bring comfort, but these words only mean something to those who are living with discomfort. How do we hear these words today? Our world offers us many messages designed

to promote the image that we can have it all together. We spend so much time and money trying to look better, get fitter, appear younger all with the implication that we do not need anything outside of ourselves and what we can do. Despite our desire to believe these things, deep down we know that this is a false message. While Jesus' message is good news, in order to hear it that way, it must seem to us as bad news; the bad news that we are not who we want to be, who we can be, who we should be...and who we never can be. Jesus' message is for those in need; it is good news to those who recognize this. Those who don't see and admit their need want nothing to do with Jesus then or Christ's call now. This good news is delivered in a communal context, the one bringing the news is singular, but all those designated to receive it are plural. When we can admit that we are needy, when we can be honest about our deep hurts, fears, longings and other issues, three things happen. First, we receive an immense sense of freedom from simply admitting the truth. Bad news—when it is true—is still better than a pretty lie which offers not security or comfort. Secondly, we can then receive the help and comfort that God offers—that release and freedom, the ability to see clearly, healing and restoration. The third things that happens is we realize we don't simply receive help and comfort, but God invites us to offer it to others—to spread the good news. We are invited, that is, not just to hear and receive good news, but to be it in our world for others. In a sense, this then is what the Body of Christ and community of faith is—God's way of delivering the promise of good news to all who come in need. What the specifics that each community of faith has been called to do to show to others looks a little different in each and every community as each has a different context with a call to tend to different needs. But the call to be the Body of Christ where we are—is the same—good news to those around us. There us another underlying message here that the good news for the poor may not be good news for those not poor. The promise of proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor refers to a part of the Hebrew Scriptures where it was declared that every fifty years, debts were to be cancelled, lands lost to debts would be redistributed. If you have accumulated great wealth through the system, then a redistribution of that wealth would not be good news at all. This is a problem with some of the call that Jesus makes which gets him into hot water with the leaders and authorities of his time. It is the same aspect of his teachings that make the good news is bad news in our society today. After the reading Jesus does which is an amalgam of verses from Isaiah 61 and 58, Jesus sits down proclaiming that what he has read has been fulfilled by his reading; he is the anointed one sent to bring good news. With these words Jesus is announcing an emancipation, proclaiming an amnesty—giving a message which will change things. Jesus will in the course of Luke's gospel do all of the things described as Jesus release people from demon possession and death, spiritual and physical blindness and restores people to community. In our culture, we are used to freedom as the license to do as one wishes. Jesus, however understand freedom very differently. It is the release from captivity to death, the will of others, and the will of self. Jesus will preach the freedom of slavery to God's will, service to neighbor and vision for an altered status quo. God never leaves people where God finds them. A change in conditions always accompanies an encounter with the divine. Radical change is what Jesus proclaims and will perform during his life and through his resurrection. Jesus does not merely affirm the condition of his children. He is about the reversal of fortunes that result not just in change in one's environmental state, but in the person itself. This is real change in the spirit and life of the person who hears the good news and whose life is never the same afterward. The Jubilee

Year of the Lord's favor may not have ever actually been practiced in ancient Israel, or anywhere else. But Jesus' announcement does not come simply as an injunction upon imperfect people but as words with power; power which can transform and affect the change proclaimed. Jesus is the change. His presence with and among us is transformative as we truly hear and understand the reign he came to proclaim and bring near. The rest of Luke's story will tell us what the change will mean both to Jesus and to us. The gift of God's grace which is our good news is free and available to us, yet the transformation which comes with it asks that we place others ahead of self in service to God vision for the world. This can be costly as we tend to think in terms of individual freedom and rights before we consider the well-being of others. In the text from 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul focuses on the gifts God gives which despite being varied, have one purpose to build up the community; to be in service to bringing God's reign into our time and place. Accepting that ALL humanity are members of one body in God's eyes can be painful as it means we have to get to know one another. Our baptism into the Christ's body is the bridge between each of us. Paul's metaphor of how if any member of the body suffers, all will suffer runs throughout the message Jesus brings that we are to care and provide, to love and tend to one another. God's grace is free, but allowing the Holy Spirit to enter and transform our very being into God's vision of what we are to be and do...can be costly. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.