**Sermon for JANUARY 26TH 2025 Luke 4:14-21 “It’s a Lot Like Soap”**

*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. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and 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." And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

There are some words that I rarely use; most of them because they are overused, or improperly used. One such word, made entirely too popular by exuberant fast-food workers and telemarketers, is *awesome*. Evidently, ‘awesome, dude’ is a complete sentence for some folks. But I need to use this much-maligned word today, because our text says that Jesus returns from his wilderness time full of the power of the Holy Spirit, and by *any* measure, the power of the Holy Spirit is an awesome thing. The power of the very breath of God, which brings life to the world and sustains all things? Awesome! And Jesus, purified by his fasting and contemplation and unexpected visits from the Adversary, is chock-full of this awesomeness. He is a young rabbi on fire, and everything folks are hearing about this Jesus so far has left them genuinely but guardedly impressed. Stories of healings and miracles, of deep wisdom and understanding and compassion are beginning to drift home to Nazareth, Jesus’ adopted hometown.

So, just a few lines into today’s story, he arrives home, and goes to church – what could be more typical? And while he is there, they offer him a chance to read the scripture and comment on it – again, typical. If one of our kids went off to seminary, and returned right after ordination, and came to church, wouldn’t if feel completely normal to offer them the pulpit? Of course it would! So, there he is, about to offer the kind of extemporaneous message that could change the world, only he isn’t quite as refined yet as he eventually becomes.

Right now, we are with Jesus in his boyhood synagogue, and they hand him the scroll with the writings of the prophet Isaiah. It’s a big scroll – one of the longest books in the Bible: 66 chapters, 1,292 verses, 37,044 words. He has a lot of material here, and he is free to choose anything. He could have played it safe, plenty of familiar verbiage in there, about God’s eternal patience and the people’s eternal messing things up, and several rather direct ideas that history has interpreted as pertaining to Jesus, himself. But even though Isaiah is the most quoted prophet in the soon-to-be-written New Testament, Jesus doesn’t choose any of the familiar stuff, but takes a different road. He unrolls to Isaiah 61, and changes history forever, claiming for himself and for all who will follow him a devotion to justice and peace that was, prior to him saying so, unknown on earth. No other leader, king, prophet, potentate, *ever*, claimed such a desire for the common good. And over the centuries, the church would come to identify itself this way, too…we are the folks who bring good news to the poor, who help blinded eyes to see, who proclaim the advent of God’s justice and favor.

The odd title of this sermon is tied to one of the preaching stories that was popular when I was in seminary. It unfolds in a marketplace, where, amongst the varied wares, there is a woman selling her homemade soap. Nice woman, nice soap, but some belligerent gets all up in her grill and loudly proclaims, “Don’t spend your sheckels on her product! Look around the town: filth, grime, dirty feet and dirty nails. Her soap doesn’t work!” She is unruffled, and shoots back with the truth: “But sir, for soap to be effective, it has to be used!” And the original point, fresh as a daisy after the news week we’ve had, is that our Christian faith is useless in bettering the world if it just sits in the dish. Our faith, like soap, is only effective when it is used. And right here, in Luke 4, Jesus sets his course and shares his self-understanding of the areas where we should be lathering up. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus is a hesitant fulfiller of Hebrew prophecy, insisting that the disciples not tell anyone who he really is. In Mark, his self-understanding is similar. In John, he is presented as the joy bringer, casual and confident. But here in Luke, we see another side of Jesus, Jesus the activist, Jesus the advocate, who claims for himself and those who will follow him the role of healers and cleaners and feeders and folks who get their hands dirty on behalf of others. And his listeners, then and now, just sit there slack-jawed.

It is not necessarily a bad thing to be paralyzed by the radiance of Jesus, or immobilized by the luminous grandeur of his call on our lives. We would be foolhardy indeed not to pause before entering this inside-out world of his, where looking out for Number One has limited value, and where attending to the demands of justice is priority one. The sheer and overwhelming injustice of the world can make it seem squalid and sordid and filthy beyond all redemption, a very human view but not the opinion of the Almighty! We need to believe in the efficacy of our soap, friends, and we need to have the courage to lather up in service to this deteriorating world.

To that end, I would like to share a few inspirational quotes from people far better and more faithful than I will ever likely be. Our own contemporary, Dr. Cornel West, said “Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public.” That’s a great way to approach it…if we would act justly, we need to bring our love into the larger community. Benjamin Franklin said it this way: “Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.” Our experiences with the Camp Fire and its aftermath leave shown us hundreds, maybe thousands of lives and arenas where justice still needs to be done, where comfort still needs to be given, where self-worth still needs to be affirmed. We will not be able to heal the blighted land up on the Ridge until we fail to see it as Paradise, up there and claim it as our own blighted land. “Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” Mother Teresa said that. Jesus said it too, in his own ways. The work of justice does not demand that we sacrifice ourselves to the point of poverty and sickness; we are instructed to turn the other cheek, not lie down across the railroad tracks. We are told to give our coat, not the deed to our home and the key to our safe-deposit box. Justice can and must be done with small, overlapping, incrementally escalating acts of fairness and kindness, or it cannot be done at all. Robert F. Kennedy had that thought in mind when he wrote this: “Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events. It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, they send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Those original listeners were dumbfounded that Jesus cared so much for the larger world, and evidently expected them to care, also. They were stymied by the filthy enormity of the task, having not thought it all the way through. But we, with the benefit of time and history, have thought about it much, and know in our hearts that justice and kindness can prevail, but we must act and engage to make that happen. When we do not act, when we do not engage, we prove the point of the immortal GK Chesterton, who said: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” And that is the most common path away from Jesus and into chaos, when we own the bar of soap but it just sits in the dish gathering dust. The difficulty of the cleanup in its wholeness blinds us to the possibility of cleaning things up bit by bit.

I need to jump out of the soap dish and into the forest to bring you a rather famous story that involves a pair of wolves. An old Cherokee chief is teaching his grandson about life, and he says: “A fight is going on inside me…it is a terrible fight, and it is between two wolves. One is evil–he is anger, envy, greed, arrogance, self-pity, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego.” After a pause to let that sink in, he continued, “The other wolf is good – he is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. This same fight is going on inside you–and inside every other person in the world, too.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, in a tiny, tense voice: “Which wolf will win?” And the old chief simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Jesus said, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”. He made a pledge that day, for himself and for all who would follow him, that the core of his life would be about feeding the good wolf. That rippling, awesome beast of joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith. That wolf is the one we need to feed and nurture. As Mother Teresa famously said, “Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin.” Amen.