***“To Proclaim Release”*** by Stephen Finlan at The First Church, February 3, 2019

**Ezekiel 39:26–29**

26They shall forget their shame, and all the treachery they have practiced against me . . . . 28Then they shall know that I am the Lord their God because I sent them into exile among the nations, and then gathered them into their own land. I will leave none of them behind; 29and I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord God.

**Luke 4:16–21, 24, 27–30**

16When 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, 17and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

18 “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, 19to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

20And 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. 21Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”. . . .

24And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town. . . . 27 Now there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.” 28When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

This Gospel passage occurs right after the temptation in the wilderness. It is the first public action Jesus takes, and it serves to introduce his ministry. Whether he was invited to read and preach or just to read in the Nazareth synagogue is not clear. But he does not give a prepared sermon. He chooses the reading from Isaiah 61, and then he makes that remarkable statement, “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (4:21).

Think of how bold this is. Jesus identifies himself as the fulfillment of this prophecy. *He* is the person on whom the Spirit rests. He has been anointed—or *chrismed*, to borrow the Greek root—to bring good news to the poor. Obviously, he is making a bold claim. If you or I were to make that claim, people would roll their eyes, and with good reason. We would certainly be off our rocker and egotistical. It is characteristic of Jesus that he can calmly make a grand claim like this without being full of himself.

Now I want to look at the *content* of his mission that he is announcing by using this scripture. He will release the captives, he will free the oppressed, he will heal the blind—I think both those who are *literally* blind, and those who are *spiritually* blind. I know because later on in his ministry he will talk about the Pharisees’ spiritual blindness. In fact, the other promises here are also spiritual; the captivity is really *spiritual* captivity; the oppression is religious or intellectual oppression. I will give some examples in a minute.

Jesus’ main concern is spiritual, and he is very keenly aware of the ways that people trap themselves. One way that people get stuck is by being *afraid* of God. “Fear not” he said, and “the Father himself loves you” (John 16:27). He reasons with them: wouldn’t your heavenly father give you good things, just as you would give good things to your child if he asked for something (Matt 7:9–11)? So don’t be afraid of God. Don’t be oppressed by frightening and cruel theology.

Another way that believers can become captives is through bias or pride, including having contempt for people outside their group, or toward other nations or races. Such a biased attitude makes one a captive. It stifles one’s heart, makes one narrow-minded. This is never the way of Jesus. He would spring us *free* from this, if we are willing. Jesus is the greatest leader of jailbreaks the world has ever known. And the jailers in those days, the hard-hearted conservative Sadducees and the pretend-liberal Pharisees, resent that about him. The Pharisees and Sadducees are still with us, and they are still trying to suppress what Jesus is doing.

But Jesus will not change his mission. He will continue to release people from captivity to bad thinking, from superstition, bias, or judgmental attitudes. Jesus would set free those who are oppressed in those ways.

In his time, it was not just the Pharisees who have these problems. The apostles also have these handicaps. He is constantly trying to wean them from their materialistic thinking, their politicized Messiah ideas, their nationalistic bias (against Samaritans, for instance), even their insensitive and dismissive attitude toward children. Remember how he shocked them by calling a child into their midst and saying that, in order to enter the kingdom of God they needed to be sincere like a child, and that they should never “put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones” (Matt 18:1–6)? He was talking to the disciples! In some ways, the disciples echoed the hard-heartedness of the world.

Jesus tries to get people to understand that tragic law of life, that “no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town” (4:24). Every forward-looking reformer is resisted by the authorities. Every courageous thinker is resented by his brothers. Every sensitive poet is sneered at by her father. This is what prophets not being accepted in their home town can *mean* in our lives.

Jesus is a prophet to the townsfolk of Nazareth. He targets their nationalistic bias, and he is merciless. They need to know that God shows no favoritism, but loves Gentiles the same as Jews. He recalls to them the biblical history that they will know well, how Elijah was not sent to *ANY* Jewish widows but only to a Sidonian one, and how there were no lepers in Israel healed in the time of the prophet Elishah, but only a *Syrian* leper (4:25–27). This enrages the Nazarenes, who don’t want to hear about God’s love for a Phoenician or a Syrian.

They grab him and carry him to the edge of a cliff where they would have killed him. But Jesus shrugged them off and walked away. He wasn’t ready to be killed by these captives of nationalistic thinking. He will eventually be killed by those captives of religious pride and power at the center of the nation’s religious system. Obviously, lots of people don’t learn the lessons Jesus would teach them. Many of those oppressed by fear won’t let themselves be released from it. Many captives prefer to remain captive to their systems of religious authority. They’re comfortable, even if they’re miserable.

This seems to be a feature of humanity, a fear of freedom, resentment of change, avoidance of responsibility, and resistance to truth. The Ezekiel passage also speaks of spiritual blindness, in the form of rebelliousness. But God intends to save the rebellious people. He says “I will never again hide my face from them, when I pour out my spirit upon the house of Israel” (39:29). The spirit changes *changes* the way people live. It cements a strong relationship to God. Never again should people think that God hides his face from them.

And that is the lesson for us, today: that the Spirit can help us overcome our rebelliousness, our nationalist pride, our fear, our spiritual blindness. Jesus can set us free from all narrowness of spirit. He would help us realize how materialism is a trap, and bias is a narrow chasm, and he would pull us out from there. Even very religious people can fall into certain mental traps—it’s really very easy to do—but Jesus came to proclaim release, to lead us into the *challenging* and sometimes difficult ways of freedom. So let him free you to be open to his courageous love, and then go forth and share this love.