

“When the Story Grips Us”

Luke 4:14-21

My best friend Kevin grew up three houses down from me. He had a terrible sense of direction when we first learned to drive. He got lost one morning on the way to our high school. Road signs were basically a foreign language to him. When you given directions he would simply respond, “Yeah ok. So Straight forever. got it.” If we were going to get anywhere when Kevin was driving I had to tell him where to go. His mom owned a teaching supply store (back in the days before Amazon). We worked together everyday after school at his mom’s store; it was like a second home for both of us. One day he was telling me about what he did over the weekend— he met some of our friends at Chili’s for dinner. Chili’s was outside our neighborhood. I don’t know how he got there without me... in fact, it was 20 minutes away through traffic with turns. He really had no sense of direction — so I asked him— “How’d you get there without me?” “I went from the store. I was at church. I drove to the store and then from there I knew my way.” It turns out this is what he did all the time. Whenever he didn’t know

how to get somewhere he drove to his mom’s store... from there he could get pretty much anywhere.

I don’t know if Jesus ever struggled with direction much in his life around Nazareth. He seemed like he always knew the way (after all, he is the way). But, if he ever wondered what he should do, what direction he should go, he would go back to Isaiah and from there he could find his way anywhere. These are his home verses. From here he can get anywhere. Because this is the place that he recognized the word God has for him to do.

When Jesus returned to his hometown Nazareth he went to the synagogue to teach. He was handed the scroll of Isaiah. The bible says he found his place. Jesus knew who he was, where he was, and where he was going... he found his place. If we are going to follow him (and be his disciples) we need to find our place where Jesus found his. These are the first words the adult Jesus speaks in the gospel of Luke. But, even these words echo the words of 12

year-old Jesus in the temple. Remember that story? Joseph and Mary didn't know where he was for 3 days. Finally, they found him in the temple sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking questions. All who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents questioned him about why he would run off and get lost, he questioned them back—“Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?” Even at that young age he knew where he belonged: among God's people in the community of people shaped by the story of scripture. He belonged in the interpretive community of those called to wrestle with the bible. The first two times we hear Jesus speak in Luke it is a testament to how he has found his place. There's a place here for us too.

Thistle Farms in Nashville, Tennessee is a community of women who have survived human trafficking and addiction. The women use their gifts to create candles and other body care products, all labeled LOVE HEALS. Shana is one of these amazing women. She was born into addiction and sold into

prostitution at the age of 12. At 15, she had “TRUST NO ONE” tattooed across her chest. After years of abuse and heartbreak, Shana found her place at Thistle Farms. It was there she learned that the biggest lie she was ever told was that she was stupid. She's helped grow the sales of Thistle Farms products nationwide and handles spreadsheets better than anyone at the farm.

Each morning the women of Thistle Farms gather together in a circle and light a candle for those still on the streets. In that circle one morning, Shana stood up and did the first cartwheel of her life. Seeing an adult do their first cartwheel of their life is really something. But what's significant about that cartwheel moment is that Shana was finally in a circle of people she could trust, a circle of women who loved her. Full of the knowledge that God loves her, and in that circle she was freed up enough to go for the cartwheel. This is release, recovery, and freedom—it's the result of the good news proclaimed and claimed.

The bible is a meeting place for that good news. It's a mirror, microscope and lens. It unearths identity, sets our hopes, and forms

us in the Spirit. In scripture we meet the depth of human suffering and sin. We also meet the profound divine grace we so deeply misunderstand. The bible is a strikingly human book, though it is enlivened by the Spirit. It's the most dangerous book ever produced. Here we find out what it means to be human— that we long to come home (to our own Nazareth) and be received... that we long to be set free and given a path to our promised land. It's about finding your place in this life (and the next). We are invited to struggle and wrestle with these pages (with these stories). But, as followers of Christ we want to find our place in the bible where Jesus found his. Christ is the lens through which we read the bible. We follow his interpretive lead. And here at the beginning of his ministry our teacher gives us a lesson.

Jesus edits Isaiah. He finds his place in the scroll and begins to read: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." Jesus stops there in the middle of v. 2 from Isaiah 61. He leaves off the end of that verse. The end says this: "and the day of vengeance of our God." Instead of reading that line, he rolls up the scroll and hands it back to the attendant. Brian Zand says, "Jesus has closed the book on God's vengeance."¹ Jesus is showing us what kind of messiah he is going to be, but he is also teaching us how to read scripture.

There are some parts of the bible that say more about us than God. When God commands genocide in the Old Testament we can be sure that is more a remnant of bronze age culture than revealing the God of Jesus Christ. When prophets like Isaiah proclaim that God will exact vengeance on Israel's enemies we should understand that verse (and others like it) as a by-product of a minority group living in an oppressive empire. That identity produced an image of hope that only the God of Jesus could provide, but their experience also brought with it the very human longing for revenge. The bible is authoritative and a perfect gift to us. But, we don't have to take the assumptions about God of bronze age culture as the truth revealed

by Christ. In fact, if we do that we miss what Jesus is doing. Jesus has closed the book on vengeance... he compares God to the Father of the prodigal son. Israel made assumptions about God coming from their ancient culture, those assumptions have to be left behind because of the God we meet in Jesus. Jesus is teaching us how to read the bible.

But now we might be thinking: "It's only in the bible that we meet Jesus!" I hope that's not true. Our whole baptist witness is born out of faith that we have met the Christ out on the road of life. The bible offers us a place to meet Jesus—in these stories that grip us and shape us in his image. But, this is not the only meeting place. It's a measuring stick to measure and understand our own experiences of God in the world. The bible is a library of human longing— it digs deep into our conscience and exposes the blend of love, lies, lust, and longing that creates the cocktail of human experience. The bible isn't afraid of delving deep into human experience because the work of the Christ isn't inch-deep redemption... it's full immersion. That's why we need to read the bible. Learn as much as you can about the cultures of the

times and the inside jokes in these pages come to life. Learn as much as you can of the struggles of the people in these pages and you will come to see yourself struggling alongside them.

Luke 4 gives us Jesus' mission statement. And this should not only be our guide in mission and ministry but also in reading scripture. Jesus is our guide, and his mission is our map. ~~We should remember what Jesus does not say here. He closes the book on vengeance and opens the book on mercy.~~ Jesus came to preach good news. So these words of scripture are meant to be good news to you. The captives are free. God is with us. ~~That's a message we need to hear... and take to heart. It's a message that should give us direction and help us find our way.~~ Let this story grip you, guide you and shape you.

Natan Sharansky was Jewish and lived in the old Soviet Union. He was thrown in jail by the KGB for attempting to immigrate to Israel. He was imprisoned for over 12 years. He was a great mathematician and a great chess player. His wife was religious. He wasn't. Before he was thrown in jail, she gave him a little book of

Psalms in Hebrew to keep his spirits up when he was in prison.

The trouble was, Sharansky couldn't read Hebrew. But he was a brilliant mathematician, so he treated Hebrew as a code, and eventually he broke the code and was able to decode the Hebrew book of Psalms. In his autobiography he tells how he did it. He was decoding Psalm 23 and he deciphered these words: "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil for you are with me."

And at that point he had a mystical experience. He said, "I suddenly felt God was saying those words to me in prison." And he called his autobiography, "Fear No Evil." He carried the Book of Psalms wherever he went for the rest of his life.

This is our story. This is your story. Fear no evil. Christ has come to set us free. Not in the end of days... now. You are free of the fear of death that keeps you chained to a way of life you hate. You are free of a family that tells you that you are anything less than a child of God. You are free of a country that tells you you are a second class citizen. You are free

and the Spirit of God is upon us... because that Spirit has given us a gospel to proclaim. The missionary Tom Harvey once said, "How can we know that we have the power of the Spirit? We know because the Holy Spirit gives us something to do for God, and a time to do it." Go set people free. And do it now. This is the spirit that gives us a home and a direction. This is the spirit that sets us free and helps us find our way.

Elie Weisel was just a teenager when he and his family were taken to Auschwitz. He witnessed the death of many of his family members. He saw the depth of human sin and despair first hand. And he saw the day that the death camp was liberated by the Allied forces. That day powerful, strong soldiers broke down the fences of the concentration camp to release the prisoners. They were a terrible sight— frail, feeble, gaunt, and near death they were terrible victims of a horrible criminal evil.

In spite of his condition Weisel remembers one soldier, a strong American man who was built like a house, who upon seeing the horror of human suffering was overcome with grief. He fell to his knees sobbing in a mix of disbelief and

sorrow. The captives, now liberated, walked over to the soldier, put their arms around him, and comforted him.²

As Jesus looked out upon that congregation in Nazareth, what do you think he saw? He saw people chained to a system of oppression they knew not how to be free of. He saw people told they were stupid. He saw people with no sense of direction. He saw prisoners in need of hope. And he said to them as he says to us today, "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."

¹ Brian Zahnd, *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, ch. 2. Zahnd gives detailed analysis of the way Jesus closes the book on divine vengeance and calls us to see God in the light of Christ.

² Elie Weisel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, from Brett Blair sermon 2001.