

What About Tomorrow?

Luke 4: 14-21

Home Moravian Church, January 26, 2025

How do you start a ministry?

That question comes up sometimes in the life of our church. Is there a new way to serve the community? Where are we needed, and what shall we do? We look back at our successful, long-term ministries, asking: What was the impetus? Who had the idea? How do ideas turn into reality? How do you *start* a ministry?

It helps to know that even Jesus had to start somewhere. All four gospels show that was in Galilee, sometime after his baptism. In our text for today, from Luke, it begins in Nazareth—which, Luke reminds us, is where Jesus was brought up. He was born in Bethlehem, but Nazareth is his hometown.

This text is from chapter 4. It has taken Luke almost three full chapters even to show us the grown-up Jesus, and it's going to take longer before we hear Jesus say much for himself. In Luke, the first words the adult Jesus speaks are not his own; they are quotes from scripture, offered in response to Satan's temptations in the wilderness, before Jesus comes to Galilee. Here are the three sentences Jesus speaks in that story:

“It is written, ‘One does not live by bread alone.’”

“It is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’”

“It is said, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’”

In the story of his temptation, Jesus lets scripture do the talking for him. And soon after, people are talking *about* him. The text says that after Jesus' time in the wilderness he "returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region."

Still waiting to hear him speak for himself, we follow him to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. With the crowd there, we watch him as he stands, takes the scroll he is offered, unrolls it, and reads the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"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 set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

He rolls up the scroll. He gives it back to the attendant. He sits down, which means he is about to teach. "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." The Greek verb for "fixing" one's eyes this way conveys a kind of stretching of the gaze, along with a connection that actually unites the gazer with the gazed upon. That's how intensely their gaze was "fixed" on Jesus. The room is vibrating with expectation; and we are right there in it. What will he say, when he speaks for himself, in a voice that comes out of himself?

"Then," says the text, "he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'"

This scripture has been fulfilled. Isaiah prophesied the coming of an anointed one—the word for anointing is *Kristos*, from which we get the word *Christ*—sent from the spirit of the

Lord to realize the hopes of the downcast, to bring forth freedom and healing. Jesus names himself the one; speaking for *and of* himself, Jesus says, “This scripture has been fulfilled.”

Because it’s a complete sentence, Jesus could have said *only* this. But he includes a few other words—in fact, his first word. In Luke’s gospel, the first word that the adult Jesus speaks that truly comes out of *himself*—not referencing another, not quoting another, not reading another—is *today*. The seeds of God’s kingdom have come to flower *today*; God’s reign on earth begins here, today, in the person of Jesus Christ.

Today is a beginning, and *today* is ongoing. The great preacher Fred Craddock—not a Baptist, as I claimed a few weeks ago, but an ordained minister in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—says that “the ministries of Jesus and of the church ... demonstrate that ‘today’ continued.”¹ God’s work was not “yesterday”; and it will go on tomorrow, too, because every tomorrow becomes *today*.

Now Jesus has set his time frame, and his sentence is complete; but still he goes on talking. Did you notice? Listen again: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled *in your hearing*.”

Jesus has now set his ministry in motion with a neat encapsulation of what matters. The time—*today*—matters. The fulfillment of scripture matters. And *witnesses* matter. At the moment when Jesus speaks for himself, out of himself, it matters that people are there to hear his voice, calling them to attention and demanding a response.

Some thirty years after Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, this day in his hometown is another birthday. Unto us is born, in the city of Nazareth, Jesus’ ministry—and Jesus’ voice. And as we witness this birth with our eyes fixed on Jesus—stretching our gaze toward him, seeking connection—we are so united with him at this moment that the voice is being born in us. The

¹ Fred Craddock, *Luke*, in the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), p. 62.

voice we hear gets our attention; the voice born within us enables us to respond. Our response will keep “today” alive into tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.

The witnesses to the birth of Jesus’ voice include, not just the people surrounding him in Nazareth that day, but generation after generation since, right down to this moment, this place, us people. Jesus’ voice is born again and again into each generation, demanding attention and equipping the witnesses for response, again and again. Generations have responded to continue the work of bringing good news, releasing captives, restoring sight, freeing the oppressed. Generations must continue to respond. Because “today” the word has been fulfilled; but what about tomorrow?

We are called to extend every “today” into tomorrow; and we are equipped to respond to the call. If we have fixed our eyes on Jesus; if in fixing our eyes upon Jesus we have truly become connected with him; then we are witnesses to the birth of his voice within us. Thus have our lives been changed, and thus have we been equipped to respond by continuing his work of healing and liberation through ministry to the world.

With Fred Craddock, in his commentary on Luke, we must acknowledge that although Jesus proclaimed the coming of God’s reign on earth, “the history of the church does not...bear unbroken testimony to Jesus’ announcement.”² There has been serious falling-off, and deeply wrong turns, and a lot of false starts. A lot of these things have happened, over centuries, when we who have witnessed the birth of Christ’s voice in our own hearts have allowed other voices to speak instead. When we have absorbed other voices that, compelling though they may be in their apparent strength and certitude, are not true to the proclamation of Jesus or to our own God-given identities.

² Ibid.

When I started working on this sermon this week, I was really excited by this discovery I thought I'd made, that we don't hear Jesus speak for himself in the gospel of Luke until that day in the synagogue. I was walking back from a coffee shop, all hopped up on scripture and caffeine, feeling all good about the sermon, and then I realized: I'm wrong. The realization came so suddenly that I can point out the patch of sidewalk where I was walking when it hit.

Did anyone notice that I've been talking about the first time we hear "the adult Jesus" speak for himself? That's my way around the fact that Jesus actually *does* speak for himself before this moment in the gospel of Luke. It happens when he's twelve years old. His family, frantically searching for him, finds him in the temple; and when his poor distraught mother berates him, he answers calmly, "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?"

That was Jesus speaking for himself, too, as a 12-year-old will; having, as a 12-year-old will, a grasp of his authentic, God-given self that the world would spend a lot of years trying to talk Jesus out of. Satan himself would try; that's one time when Jesus relied on scripture. To our current 12-year-olds, or soon-to-be-12-year-olds, or anyone who once was a 12-year-old, I'd like to point out that when your authentic, God-given self is challenged, it really helps to know some scripture.

When we wonder what ministry to start, and how to start it, we can look to the story of Jesus in his hometown synagogue, and realize that ministry is not so much started as born. It is born in our authentic voices, coming out of our authentic selves: out of the scriptures that have formed us; the history that has undergirded us; the joys and sorrows that have shaped us; and, above all, the voice of Jesus that is born within us.

As we ponder our continuing call to ministry, and pray to move closer to our vision of "a church engaged, a community healed, a world transformed," let us listen deeply for the authentic

voice of this congregation, echoing the authentic voice of Jesus Christ. In that ring of authenticity, we will hear the sound of something new emerging in our midst, demanding our attention and equipping us for response, through Christ our Lord. Amen.