

January 24, 2010
Psalm 19
Luke 4:14-22a

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Making the Connection

Jesus has come home. The hometown boy, now all grown up, has been out in the world making a name for himself. Now he comes home to the tiny village of Nazareth, where he grew up, and where probably everybody had known him since he was knee high to a grasshopper, as my granddaddy would have put it, and he claimed the honor in the same synagogue where he had learned his abc's, of reading the scripture assigned for the day, and then preaching on it. And naturally the whole town turned out. This was, in the most real sense of the word, the inaugural address of Jesus' ministry. That inaugural address made a number of important connections.

The first connection I want you to see is this: The words assigned for that day came from the prophet Isaiah, in what may have been an amazing coincidence, announcing "the day of the Lord". Jesus, a faithful Jew all his life, first of all was connecting his ministry with the ancient traditions of the faith. And the second connection was immediate: The words, the Day of the Lord echoed with meaning for the people. The Day of the Lord was Jubilee, or a day of restoration, a promised time when debts were to be forgiven and land was to be restored to its original owners. Jubilee was supposed to take place every fifty years: an ideal of justice quite foreign to our minds steeped in a society that honors capitalism and individualism, but to these people hearing those words meant restoration of hope.

The people of Israel always remembered that they had formerly been a nomadic people who had wandered in the desert for generations before entering into the land, and they understood that the land was not really theirs, but God's, and that they lived on it as God's guests, or as we might put it today, as stewards. Each

tribe was given a parcel of land, and within that parcel, a piece of land for every family. So Jubilee meant a response to the injustice of unbridled greed and a restoration of balance.

Was Jubilee ever practiced? It's quite doubtful. But the ideal was cherished, and as one scholar said, may have functioned as a critical fulcrum to allow a critique of what was seen as an unjust society.

So Jesus wasn't coming home to preach a new, odd or strange message, but an old and cherished one, inherited from the prophets.

Let's stop and make a third connection: this one, though not explicit in Jesus' inaugural address, was implicit in the faith and in the ideal of Jubilee, and it is a connection that must become explicit for us today. Jesus' announcement of Jubilee is a call for justice in society and also for the earth itself, with the reminder, as we heard this morning in the psalm, that the earth is the Lord's, and that we become arrogant at our peril.

When Jesus talks about justice, using the words of Isaiah, he speaks of four aspects: bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free. Each of these aspects may be taken on two levels: the literal and individual, and the symbolic and corporate levels. The example of recovery of sight to the blind is picked up later in Jesus ministry, where he uses the restoration of sight to a blind man to refer to those who have eyes but will not see, and where the metaphor is applied to Peter learning to understand, or to see, the fullness of Jesus' message. Jesus clearly wanted, and still wants, to restore vision to the community. And here we make one more connection: the connection between the people to whom Jesus first said those words and us, to whom he says them today.

An inaugural message is an interesting and unique kind of thing. Particularly when it is given by one regarded as a savior. People have a tendency to look at such a person as supremely capable of giving us what we think we need, or what we want. I'm about to give you a modern example.

The connection I am now going to draw is not intended to be presumptuous or denigrating in any way to Jesus Christ as Savior of the world. I'm speaking of the people who hear the address, and the expectations we develop.

Only one year ago, Barak Obama made an inaugural address. That address contained within it the call for change and justice that he had claimed throughout his campaign. People thronged to Washington to hear that address, and we saw pictures of folks standing in the streets with tears of joy running down their cheeks. But somehow, the nation then handed the president's agenda back to him, either expecting that singlehandedly he could make it real, or not really thinking about it as a challenge to all of us. People who voted for him saw the president not, of course, as *the* savior, but as *a* savior, and an odd consequence of that way of seeing is that people seem to have left the responsibility for change to him. And while we all will see our lives change with the success or failure of his promises, he alone will bear the weight of public opinion about the rightness or wrongness of those promises and his ability to bring them to fruition.

We have not seen many persons deciding to run for office in towns and cities across the country in order to pick up on his message and make his dream, the dream that the country appeared to share, into reality on all levels. We have not seen many people who voted for him and seemed to agree with his vision, translating that vision and claiming it and naming it as theirs on television, or in public forums. On a practical level, he pretty much has been left alone to sell his agenda.

Now, noting that as an example, I wonder if it is something we tend to do to people if we idolize them, whether it is on a political level or on a spiritual level or on any other level. I wonder if great numbers of us have a tendency not to want to make the connection with a leader's call and our own feet, as it were, waiting until others, a few motivated faithful followers, have built a movement. Until it doesn't seem too daring or scary to step forward in support.

Or, perhaps, our responses may be even worse.

What do I mean by that? You'll have to wait until next week, for this story continues, and it takes a strange twist. For now, we must simply pause at a question mark. Don't forget to tune in at the same time next week.