



“Joining Jesus”

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

January 24, 2010

Scripture – Luke 4: 14-30

Jesus went home for the weekend, attended services on the Sabbath as he'd been raised, and was handed the scroll of Isaiah. He carefully selected a section, stood up and read:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because God has appointed me to bring good news to the poor.
God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

Then Jesus sat down and began to preach “Today this scripture had been fulfilled.” This is God's agenda, Jesus said, and it is here, it's happening now.

Well this sounded wonderful to his congregation for they knew themselves to be a poor, conquered, indebted, helpless, oppressed people. God's redemption had come! But before they could even applaud or say “Amen, brother!” Jesus sensed their rising doubts, and said to them “a prophet is never welcome in his own hometown.” He then reminded them how Elijah was sent to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon, and Elisha had healed not the countless lepers in Israel but Naaman, the Syrian officer - Israel's enemy! Both examples cited God's grace for Gentiles, not Jews. Jesus essentially says, “This is God's agenda, but it is God's agenda for all people, for the world!” Not just for Israel, but for Gentiles. Or not just for Christians, but for Muslims and Hindus, for enemies like Osama bin Laden, as well as your dearest loved one, for the unclean, untouchables, the murderers and rapists, the drug pushers and child abusers, for sinners and tax collectors, for fat bank executives, crafty lawyers and sleazy used car dealers. Everyone – especially the ones who are outcast, pushed to the fringes of society, the despised ones. When Jesus proclaimed the words of Isaiah to his hometown congregation, his listeners believed that they had him figured out; they also thought they had God figured out. Hometown boy or not, Jesus upends the religious tradition of his community.¹

Like those first listeners to Jesus' words, we may take offense at this interpretation of God's agenda, God's priorities for the poor, the captives, the oppressed, God's boundless love

for even our enemy and those we deem contemptible and unworthy. But Jesus continues to set out God's agenda and point to God's realm here, now – not in the future – but God here NOW.

Sara Miles is a self-described blue-state, secular intellectual, and lesbian left-wing journalist. Having been raised by parents hostile to religion, Miles had never attended a church, or read a Gospel or said the Lord's Prayer when, one Sunday, out of curiosity she walked into St. Gregory's Episcopal Church in San Francisco. When she was offered a chunk of bread during communion, she took it, tasted it, and in that moment experienced the mysterious reality of a God who wants to fill all people with good things. Sara Miles became a follower of Jesus, joined St. Gregory's Church, and talked the church board into starting a ministry of giving away food to the poor each week. In her book *Take This Bread*, Miles writes about her conversion and the call she felt to start the church's Food Pantry. One day each week food is distributed from the altar in the middle of the sanctuary and people of every ilk line up around church for blocks. Miles, now Director of Ministry in her parish, writes this about our passage from Luke:

Jesus is proclaiming that God, right now, today, is turning the world upside down. God, right now, is saving and freeing and healing and forgiving. And Jesus is inviting us into that work. It is the literal work of siding with the oppressed and undeserving. It is the frequently uncomfortable work of telling the truth everywhere, to enemies and friends.ⁱⁱ

Jesus understood this to be God's work for himself as the anointed One, the Beloved sent to bring good news to the poor, to release the captives, to heal the blind, free the oppressed, and proclaim God's love and grace to any and all who would listen. He declares *this* is the realm of God – where God so chooses to be – with the poor, imprisoned, helpless, and oppressed. That's where God- the Eternal I AM is. Therefore, beckons Jesus,

“Jump in,
Join in,
Let's DO God's work together!”

I want to pause here, and consider the implications of this text for the situation in Haiti. Contrary to what Pat Robertson said about God acting punitively towards the Haitians for some pact Robertson believes their ancestors made with the devil, Jesus would have us believe that God has a bias *for* the Haitians. Indeed, their ancestors were slaves, and their country is the poorest in the Western Hemisphere. Listen to this translation of the prayer Haitian revolutionary Boukman Dutty is said to have uttered at the infamous voodoo ceremony of 1791:

The god who created the sun which gives us light, who rouses the waves and rules the storm, though hidden in the clouds, he watches us. He sees all that the white man does. The god of the white man inspires him with crime, but our god calls upon us to do good works. Our god who is good to us orders to revenge our wrongs. He will direct our arms and aid us. Throw away the symbol of the god of the whites who has so often caused us to weep, and listen to the voice of liberty, which speaks in the hearts of us all.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hmm. I would swear this god of the revolting slaves bears striking resemblance to Yahweh, who delivers good news to the poor and desires the release of captives.

Rather than abandoning the people of Haiti, God was with them before the earthquake; and as Greg said last Sunday, God's heart broke at the death and devastation it has wrought. God did not cause the earthquake. Where is God as the people of Haiti struggle to survive? God is right there - *with them* in their hunger and thirst, their pain and suffering – and God is calling us to bring them comfort and relief, healing and hope.

How do we join Jesus in the work of God? How do we participate in God's realm? We set about discovering what Jesus is already doing in the world and try to help. We look for ways to share blessings with the poor, to free the captives, to heal the blind and helpless, and to side with the oppressed. Just look at the announcements in our worship bulletin or weekly word, on any given week and you'll see many ways to put our faith in action, and join Jesus in fulfilling God's agenda of saving, healing, freeing and forgiving. We share good news with the poor when we serve meals at Emmanuel Dining Room, bring food for the hungry, donate clothes, volunteer for Family Promise or Friendship House, build with Habitat. We help set the captives free when we sponsor groups here at church like NA, AA, Al Anon, and mental health support groups; when we offer classes in getting rid of credit card debt and oppose pay day loan stores. We join in the healing ministry of Jesus as we visit and volunteer at the hospital, serve as a Stephen Minister, pray for those who are ill. We work to free the oppressed by writing letters to our legislators urging prison reform, or lobbying for universal healthcare.

But today our eyes have been opened to a global community, and in case you have not noticed, the new generation understand themselves to be world citizens. They write letters and protest the ongoing genocide in Sudan. Students from grade school to college resonate with Greg Mortenson, author of *Three Cups of Tea*, and donate their pennies, weekly allowance and lunch money to help him build schools for girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan. My daughter-in-law donated the \$200 she received at Christmas to the relief efforts in Haiti, and emailed an invitation to friends and family to match it. As our world gets smaller and smaller we find it impossible to ignore and neglect our neighbors in Sudan and Haiti, Congo and Kenya, Guatemala and Ghana, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Last week I finished reading the book *Half the Sky*, written by the Nobel Prize winning couple Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. They passionately and persuasively argue that women and girls comprise the most oppressed population in the world – both in terms of numbers and acts of violence. In the first chapter they estimate that there are 3 million women and girls *enslaved* in the sex trade worldwide today.

We generally think of slavery as an historical atrocity not a contemporary evil. Yet the U.S. State Department has estimated that between 600,000 to 800,000 people are trafficked across international borders each year, 80% of them women and girls, mostly for sexual exploitation. Moreover, these numbers do not include the millions of victims around the world who are trafficked within their own national borders. During the peak decade of the transatlantic slave trade, in the 1780's, an average of just under 80,000 slaves were shipped annually across the Atlantic from Africa to the New World. While the situation has vastly improved in the

United States, the reality remains that slavery persists as a human horror in our world today.^{iv} I highly recommend this book to every person of faith, and can think of no better study for every women's circle in the church. It is filled with not only with heartbreaking stories of the ongoing violence against women and girls, but also inspiring examples of how faithful people are working to end women's suffering and heal their lives. The authors carefully enumerate concrete ways we too can help.

A young adult recently emailed me asking, "What is required to join the church?" I explained that a person would need to attend a class, fill out some forms, meet with the session, and answer the questions for active members from the *Book of Order*. Then I listed the expectations of membership: regular worship attendance and giving of time, talent, and treasure. I later pondered whether joining the church always leads people to joining Jesus in His work in the world.

My husband Keith works with the confirmation class, and we occasionally discuss how difficult it is to teach youth what it means to become a member of the church. I've begun wondering if we could make confirmation this simple: To be confirmed would be to publicly join up with Jesus by declaring your desire and intention to participate in his work of helping the poor, healing the sick, freeing the captive, and siding with the oppressed.

Sometimes we find it hard to catch up with Jesus. We Presbyterians can get so caught up in discussing budgets and buildings, or arguing over ordination standards and politics, that Jesus may simply pass through the midst of us and be on his way. But he is forever calling us to join him in God's work in the world, and he empowers us to do just that.

You see friends, we have been joined to Jesus in our baptism, and we also have been anointed with God's Spirit. We come here each week to remember our identity as followers of Jesus, to be refreshed and renewed with word and sacrament, to worship the God who calls each of us, *beloved* and sends us also into the world to share, heal, free and forgive. Let us join our Lord Jesus, today and tomorrow and the next that God's love, justice and peace may flourish.

ⁱ Bruce Epperly, "Reflections on the Lectionary" p. 20, *Christian Century*. January 26, 2010

ⁱⁱ Sara Miles, "Today is Here" www.journeywithjesus.net 1-18-2010

ⁱⁱⁱ Ryan Rodrick Beiler, essay at www.sojo.net 1-15-2010

^{iv} Kristof and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*. p. 10, (New York: Knopf, 2009)