

Sermon: Jesus' Mission Statement
Scripture: Luke 4: 14-21
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
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What's most interesting about this passage that Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah is where he stops the quote and what he doesn't say. You gotta read it to believe it. Please turn with me to Isaiah 61 verses 1 and 2 and take notice (page 691, Pew Bible).

"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 bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." now read the very next sentence, "...and the day of vengeance of our God!" He goes out of his way to end the sentence early. Why? Well, it would seem that Jesus is presenting a different picture of God for the people listening that day, a picture of a God who essentially cares about the poor, the brokenhearted, the captive and prisoners, the people on the bottom and not a God of wrath who is involved in retribution or vengeance. It's so obvious that Jesus would present such a picture of God that it hardly seems it needs to be spoken. But it does. Because I think it's largely missed in our largely Christian society and a movie that I saw this week demonstrates that in a BIG way.

I highly recommend that you do NOT see a movie called The Book of Eli. It's one of the big box office hits these days with Denzel Washington playing the main role. I didn't really know the full premise of the movie when I went and that was a mistake. It's a story set in a post-apocalyptic era where all the earth has basically been destroyed and there are only pockets of human beings still living who are mostly savages and have lost all sense of morality. And into this depraved and devastated landscape you meet Eli who has been told by God, you eventually learn, that he needs to carry a Bible, actually the last and only Bible left, into the west. For what exact reason he is not sure but only that God has entrusted this task to him and that God has promised to protect him along the way. And so the majority of the movie is him walking the road and being attacked and chased by bad men who want the book for themselves and Eli has got this BIG long machete and very efficiently, and even gracefully in all his skill, he kills all these bad men and I mean KILL as in slaughters them... all in the name of getting the Bible to

where it needs to go. And I could be wrong about this, but I don't think the film-makers are being ironic or making the opposite point. This blockbuster film that grossed this past weekend over 32 million dollars and is the number 2 movie in the country is the story of a hero who feels justified in killing a lot of people to protect the Christian Bible! At one point, when Eli and his young female counter-part who has chosen to join him on his quest, leave the latest scene of destruction, which I'll spare you from describing, she remarks on how she was sorry she had just caused the particular trouble, which he had just saved her from by killing everyone that was messing with her, and he says reflectively "well, I think I've finally learned something from carrying the Bible around for all these years..." and I thought to myself "could this be some kind of conversion and he's going to now eschew violence...?" and he says "I think I've finally learned the central lesson of the book which is it's better to do for others than always just to do for yourself." Even if the doing for others involves huge amounts of violence! Amazing, right?! The number 2 box office smash of the weekend!

It is amazing to me that in our culture there is only an extremely small corner of confessing Christians who hold nonviolence as front and center to their faith. Only a very small contingent of Christians are vocally disturbed by the fact that our culture so freely and so thoroughly glorifies and celebrates such violence and - in this blockbuster movie at least - it does so even in the name of religion, the very thing that we are horrified with Muslim fundamentalist schools for promoting... and yet those Muslim schools won't reach the numbers of people that this movie will reach and those teachers won't receive the amount of money that these film-makers will receive from such a film. Of course, ours is just entertainment, however I wonder if our movie theatres aren't on some level replacing our churches. In terms of attendance, I'm sure the theatres are winning out. And I wonder if we aren't flocking to movie theatres to seek some sense of the transcendent and finding it more readily available there than in our churches?

But in any case, we must say it again from this little pulpit instead of the stadium screens, Jesus, our great teacher, our Lord, our model, our savior, did not save us by way of violence or retribution or vengeance against the "bad" people, nor did Jesus promote an understanding of God that in any way involved violence or wrath. But Jesus' revelation of God was no less tough, maybe even tougher. Jesus revealed to us a God

that loved this world so much that He was willing to suffer for it, suffer even unto death. You see, there is no violence and vengeance in God and if we want to be in God then there will be no violence and vengeance in us either.

But THAT is easier said than done. When we live in a system that has come to be such that daily we do a certain amount of violence to the created world by how we live, it's easier to say "if we want to live in God there will be no violence in us" than it is to live that way. When we live at the top of a system that has some people way up on top and other people way down under the bottom, it's easier to say we want to live in God than it is to actually live that way. In a culture that lauds and celebrates the triumph of the good guys through the destruction of the bad guys in film and in international relations, it's easier to say let's live without violence and vengeance than it is to actually do so. In a society which extols self-preservation and self-fulfillment above most everything else giving a certain amount of license to the violence and vengeance that surfaces in us when our self-preservation or self-fulfillment is thwarted, it's easier to say we want to live in God than it is to actually live there.

But it was there that Jesus chose to live. The scripture we have for this morning is basically Jesus' mission statement that Luke presents at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. These words from Isaiah are the first public words that Jesus speaks laying out his own personal bottom line. What am I about? What am I living for? What is my purpose? Jesus says this is it: "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 bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." I just remind you that his last statement there – "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" refers to the Jubilee practice of the people of Israel when every 50 years the land and wealth accumulated over those years would be redistributed to the original holders of it. I know, it's a scandalous even offensive notion for those of us nurtured in the capitalist ways of private ownership, but this is Jesus' mission statement, his purpose, his bottom line.

And if you read through the rest of the Gospel of Luke you realize that Jesus remained true, completely faithful, to this bottom line, throughout his short life. And his life was short, in fact, BECAUSE he remained utterly true to that mission. And I would

imagine that if he lived in this majority Christian nation today, some 2000 years later, that he wouldn't last much longer, because despite the prevalence of Christianity I think in general the bottom line for our country is at odds with his bottom line. Our society is not structured to bring good news to the poor nor primarily to bind up the brokenhearted or to release the captive or to distribute wealth so that everyone has enough and no one has too much. And for those who would hold out for such things as the things of God, above all else, without compromise, I'm afraid a cross – or something equivalent - is the reward that person would receive, just as Jesus did some 2000 years ago.

All for love. To live within God and with God's love flowing through you is a dangerous proposition. Dave Matthews puts in one of his songs these words in the mouth of Jesus, he sings – “why in all this hatred, God, did you fill me up with love?” And then again “why in all this anger, Lord, did you fill me up with love, love love.” And yet to be filled with love is our purpose, our mission, our goal. It's not some other goal, like to get into heaven or to promote our own religion or economic or political system or even to preserve ourselves and our people, nor is it to ensure that our sacred scriptures endure the apocalyptic future that we could be bringing upon ourselves. Our purpose and mission and bottom line is love, the tough as nails, utterly enduring, unstoppable, graceful, transformative power of love... and that alone.