

Sermon for the Third Sunday After the Epiphany: Luke 4:14-21

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The other day, I was watching stupid stuff on TikTok, and a video popped up with a guy talking about how intense the brain fog is that comes from Covid and lingers well after other symptoms have gone away. He said he hoped one day he'd be able to word good and brain good again. But it was one of the comments that described the phenomenon so well. It said, "brain fog is like your entire brain is covered in wet glue." It's a little gross, and maybe this is the brain fog talking, but I have yet to come up with a better way to explain it. For folks that experience brain fog regularly, I am learning something about your life I never fully understood before. It's awful, and it's frustrating. It's like my brain can't churn normally, or maybe I'm mid-sentence and the word processor just shuts down, or maybe it just takes an extra second or two -- a lifetime in brain functioning -- to even understand the words said to me.

Back in seminary, one of my professors reminded us about humility, the need to be humile and to be honest about. Avoid false humility, but also don't brag. Sure, we all nodded along. But then she clarified in a way I really didn't expect. She said humility isn't just naming what you're bad at, it's naming what you're good at, too. And knowing the difference and asking for help when you need it is how you live that out. So, in that vein, I think it's ok to say that I'm pretty confident in my use of words. I know that writing comes easier to me than to most, and most of the time, when I do write, I'm pretty happy with the output. Sometimes I know I've written a stinker, but that's bound to happen. Sometimes I need an editor more than others, but most of the time, I feel pretty good about my facility with language. Lately, then, you can imagine just how frustrating the linguistic portion of the brain fog has been for me. It's like my bodybuilding friend who got Lou Gherig's disease or some of the brilliant minds around here we've seen shift into the decay of Alzheimer's or dementia. There's an irony to it that's kinda interesting from afar and really unpleasant up close. All that to say, my confidence in my wordcraft has taken a big hit this past month. I'm reading voraciously, but the words I produce take longer to land on the page, and I'm not as sure in their footing. I suspect this will repair in time, the wet glue will slough off and I'll be back to my ticky-typing self. But for now, at least, there's an extra serving of humility on my Covid plate.

I guess I bring all this up because I'm in awe of Jesus' confidence stepping into the synagogue in his hometown. He pops right in, unfurls the scroll of Isaiah, and says in no uncertain terms, "I'm the Messiah you've been waiting for." Then he rolls it back up, hands it to an acolyte, and says, "Did I stutter?" I mean, y'all. There's no imposter syndrome creeping through that man's brain, not in that moment. The audacity. The gall. The guts. Looking back, we can point to the moment and say Jesus was just telling the truth, being humble in the way my seminary professor talked about, naming what was true without puffed up falsehood.

Sure, but this passage we're hearing today actually leaves out a pretty important part of the story, one we're gonna hear next week. But hearing the two halves of the same story separated by seven whole, entire days might make you think they're not connected, so I want to stitch them together real quick. You see, Jesus declares in front of God and everybody that he is the Messiah as described in the scriptures. He is the one they've all been waiting for. He grew up on the mean streets of Nazareth, and all this time, it's been little ol' Jesus from two streets over that'll save the people of God. And that's where next week's reading will pick up. Jesus says, "I am the Messiah," and the crowd gets so angry that they are, quote, "filled with rage." They get out of their pews, chase him to the edge of a cliff, and try to hurl him off. It's only thanks to a disappearing miracle that he escapes their anger. See? It's a little weird that this week's story cuts off where it does. It's a neater package to wrap up where we stopped today, but it's not where the story ends, not. at. all.

There's a couple of things buried in all this kerfuffle that're important, though, regardless of Jesus' confidence and the people's response. For one, there's something to be said for reading a room. Jesus could've

maybe, just maybe, eased into his proclamation a little bit? Something a little more diplomatic or that would lead his listeners through some rhetorically compelling moves to his final claim. But this Jesus is not a debate superstar.

More than all that, what Jesus says he is matters quite a lot. And in our day, after reading enough headlines and books and maddening text messages, I gotta wonder just how much his delivery mattered. Jesus says he is the Messiah - that's what being the one anointed in Isaiah means - Jesus says he is the one that is anointed, but to do what? "To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." In other words, Jesus isn't just the Messiah, he's the Messiah sent to set right all those wrongs in his society. To approach the last people he *should* be seen with with compassion and justice. To see the value of people that stand before him and people he'll never meet. Given all that, it could be even with perfect delivery, he'd still enrage a crowd.

Now, it may be tempting to say he's looking at the people in front of him as opposed to the Law -- I know some Christians that would say just that -- but I think that's not quite right. I think what Jesus will do is show people how the Law is for the people, not to punish them, but to provide for their safety and well-being. What he *is* fighting is those places the Law has been twisted from its pure form into something nasty. Look at these other passages we get today: in Nehemiah, the reading of the Law is cause for a massive party, complete with wine and chewing the fat and setting aside take-out bags for the food cupboard. In the Psalm, the Law is like gold, it's sweeter than honey, it revives and it rejoices and it is true. Paul's letter's a beautiful bridge, citing various laws and weaving them together into the Body of Jesus himself, even the Body of Us the Believers, The Body of Christ. All useful and necessary and contributing in our own ways and missed when absent. The Jesus he speaks of, even the community of Christians, is sorta the Law Incarnate. Jesus isn't opposed to the Law in favor of people. Jesus is The Law, the People are the Law, we are the Law. Sweeter than honey, rejoicing, and true -- if we do the work that anointed Messiah began so long ago, the work on that scroll from Isaiah, "To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Now, I know that's a mighty big request, and it would be no matter when we'd read this. But it's especially big right now. My wet-glue-brain sure is making it tough to do much of anything, not to mention live into that embodied law. And even if I were at 100%, the restrictions of the pandemic make it tough to figure out just how to get to the people that need us. And even if there weren't a pandemic, there's countless other forces that keep us from doing this work. Thing is, no matter what the world looks like, there will always be people who need the church, who need us, who need something, anything on which to hang their hopes. Something sweeter than honey and shining with truth. No matter what the world looks like, there will be someone that needs us. But, no matter what the world looks like, there'll also be some bucket full of reasons we'll tell ourselves that could get us off the hook this time. Maybe it's a sort of spiritual brain fog, a knowledge of what we ought to be doing with a gap in our processor that keeps us from doing it.

There's a humility in all of this, though. A humility in knowing that we have something beautiful, if only the world would turn its gaze our way. A humility in the knowledge of what our little church community brings. A humility in the pride we take in serving those we are anointed to serve. That's not arrogance. That's not even confidence. That's our calling. "To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."