

Rev. Dr. Cornel Barnett
Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
January 24, 2016

Luke 4:14-21
“Inspired and Anointed”

The lectionary reading today fits perfectly into this my first sermon of the year. My first worship service this year was on January 3, the café-style service, and I gave a homily followed by congregational discussion. It wasn't a sermon proper.

The gospel text today provides me an opportunity to do something I wanted to do all of last year – and that is take extracts from the *2015 Presbyterian Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study* as communication of the good news.

This is the book [shown with book in hand]. It is the last hard copy of the book. It is a beautiful item with print and pictures throughout and color plates in the center. After many years in hard copy form it became too expensive to print and now it is obtainable online only through the presbyterianmission.org site.

The book contains stories and prayers from every presbytery in the denomination and the mission of the Presbyterian Church and partners around the world. A presbytery or world mission has one day in the year dedicated to it throughout the year.

In past years, I have dipped into the book but last year I used it religiously as one of my daily devotions and actually read the entire the book in the year, one day at a time. In the reading, I thought it would be great to highlight parts of it in a sermon or two.

The reason that the gospel text, which taken from today's lectionary, is perfect is that Luke 4:18-19, also the bulletin cover quote, was the theme passage for entire year. What a beautiful coincidence!

The text is this: “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 let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

We see in the context that this passage, which comes from the prophet Isaiah, was read in scroll form by Jesus in the synagogue and when he finished reading it he sat down and all the eyes of the synagogue were on him and he said that the text was fulfilled that day in their hearing. In other words, the text was about Jesus and his ministry and since it appears at the beginning of his ministry it is known as the mandate for his ministry.

From the beginning, Jesus is inspired and anointed to do this special work. We read the gospels and we see Jesus enacting these things. We read the stories of the church throughout our country and world and we see people inspired and anointed like Jesus.

Remember the last baptism we experienced in the church: The Holy Spirit laid claim on the baptized and they were anointed. That goes for all of us so we too are given the mandate that Jesus was given at the beginning of his ministry. Sometimes it is difficult to see all these things in a single church but we certainly see it in the collective church.

Our church does amazing ministry and we support in cash and kind ministries throughout our country and world and since we are a connectional church every ministry everywhere is our ministry.

Now to the 2015 Presbyterian Yearbook for Prayer and Study: My first reading is an account from our partner churches in the beleaguered country of Syria. When one reads a devotional such as this, one realizes that in all the troubled countries of the world, churches are keeping the faith in amazing and courageous ways.

The article on Syria is written by Pauline Coffman, moderator of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Syria-Lebanon Mission Network. She writes, "During the January 2014 consultation called by the National Evangelical Synod of Syria and Lebanon, Rev. Josef Kasaab, synod director of spiritual life, told those gathered, 'Our churches will not be the same after this experience.' He spoke of the synod's efforts to revise its mission in the midst of the conflict that engulfs Syria.

"Social work is now an essential part of the ministry of the synod's congregations: for the widows, the orphans, and the elderly. Ministers who used to be judged on their ability to preach the Word of God are now judged on how well their respective congregations minister to members and those who are in need—regardless of religion.

"Consultation participants included about 20 Presbyterian ministers still serving congregations in Syria, where many church buildings have been bombed and are not usable for worship. They meet for worship in apartments in neighborhoods where they feel safe.

"Josef told the participants that the church must also proclaim that salvation is available through Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior; they cannot be merely 'social gospel' churches."

Coffman continues, "We have much to learn from these Christian brothers and sisters. What would our witness be if our freedom to express our faith were threatened? These Syrian pastors (most of who studied at the Near East School of Theology in Beirut which the Presbyterian Church USA supports) are working hard to keep their members in Syria. They want to continue their witness where they are."

The prayer for the day was, "Gracious God, we pray for the pastors and churches in Syria and for all Syrians who suffer from the violence in their country. Send your Holy Spirit to lift them and to replenish them for the work ahead. Amen."

I met with a recently-retired pastor last week and he mentioned that the sermons he gave in the months before his retirement were on subjects he hadn't touched in his long term as a minister in his church. I ask for an instance.

Earlier in the conversation we spoke about the angst in our churches and society in the weeks following 9/11. He said one of the topics was how we as congregations can prepare for another cataclysmic situation in our country much like 9/11 or an economic meltdown akin to the depression of 1929 or a major climate catastrophe.

How will the spirit and our anointing inspire us to be about the gospel of Jesus Christ? What's happening for the Syrian churches now might very well be our primary task later. We prepare ourselves by continuing to be our caring selves in and through this church, in our consciousness of how we live Jesus's mandate as communicated in the gospel passage today, and if we feel called to join community groups engaged in disaster preparedness and other actions. All this is done with joy and not with fear. There is too much fear in society today. So we replace fear with joy!

As to proclaiming the gospel message to our family, friends and neighbors, we do the best we can *by example* and when the occasion arises *in word*.

I remember being invited to preach to poor farm workers in South Africa and when I told my Zulu translator that as a privileged white person I didn't feel confident, equipped or able to preach to these workers. They needed better treatment on the job and fair pay. I did not want to baptize poverty. He said that they needed to hear the good news as well. In halting fashion and yet emboldened by the Holy Spirit, I proclaimed God's message of love, compassion and care for them and God's desire to lift them out of their present situation.

I meet in a book group of politically and religiously diverse people and whenever religious accounts or metaphors, whatever, come up in our books, all classics, I invariably say something either to affirm the author's point of view or to critique the theology and religious practices communicated through the work.

We recently read Camus' brilliant novel, *The Stranger*, and you might remember the encounter the protagonist has with the priest at the end of the work where the priest visits him in prison. From a pastoral perspective, I had problems with the way the priest barged into the prison against the protagonist's wishes and with his pastoral style and communication. I shared this with the group and I think they appreciated the perspective. That's communicating the good news of the gospel.

I have shared one story from the Mission Yearbook and I have a few successive Sundays ahead of me to communicate more. I'll leave it there. Amen.