

The BUILD text study for Thursday, January 21st, 2016 Shiloh Baptist Church

Colleagues:

Luke 4:14-21 will be the text under discussion at our BUILD Clergy Text Study on Thursday, January 21st. I invite you to read this text before you come and bring your Bible with you. The following material is presented to you with the hope that it will help “prime the pump” for our discussion. Ron Luckey

A word of caution by a Baptist colleague:

“Luke 4:14:21 is one of the most ignored, watered down, spiritualized texts in many pulpits, evading or emptying Jesus’ first statement of his moral agenda...Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized, the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners—and turn the economic structures upside down, instituting the year of Jubilee when crushing debts were forgiven and slaves were freed.” A statement by Robert Parham, The Baptist Center for Ethics, 2007

A personal word:

Speaking for myself, one who is not among the poor, marginalized, oppressed, or imprisoned this is a challenging text, because it is threatening to contemplate the turning upside down of economic structures from which I benefit.

Some background on the text:

Luke 4:14-21 follows hard on the heel of Jesus’ time in the wilderness following his baptism. Luke implies that during synagogue services that day, Jesus chose to read the portion of Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1ff) not at random or because it was assigned to him, but rather as a strategic choice in order to emphasize the focus of his ministry, the poor and marginalized. Jesus reading and his short, pointed exposition of the Isaiah text (verse 21) send the unmistakable signal that the liberation of the impoverished and oppressed is of paramount importance to his ministry.

The late Fred Craddock of Candler School of Theology, in his commentary on St. Luke’s gospel, makes the point that Luke places the Nazareth visit as the first thing Jesus does in his ministry “because it is first, not only chronologically but programmatically. That is to say, this event announces who Jesus is, of what his

ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church.”

Obery Hendricks, in his book, The Universe Bends Toward Justice: Radical Reflections on the Bible, the Church, and the Body Politic says it like this: “When you put it all together, Jesus’ inaugural sermon has the ring of a revolutionary manifesto...(He) announced that he was anointed by God to change the world, not just spiritually, but economically and politically, too. In fact, Jesus’ economic and political missions are the very foundation of his spiritual mission, because the only evidence of anyone’s spiritual relationship with God is the quality of care and concern and treatment they give to God’s other children, especially those who are different.”

Carol Lakey Hess, Associate Professor of Religious Education at Candler School of Theology, Emory University has written:

“The implication of this text is that if we are going to study, interpret, and follow the gospel, we should keep coming back to this text to measure our work.”

Notes on the text:

The notes below reflect a consensus of opinion among the commentators I consulted.

- As in all of prophetic literature in the Bible, the “poor” in the Isaiah text (vs. 18) are economically impoverished not through a stroke of bad luck or because of bad choices they’ve made, but mainly because of the way the society is structured economically and politically.
- In Jesus’ time, the “captives” referred to in vs. 19 would have been those held in captivity in Roman jails, often because they could not pay their taxes, etc.
- In verse 19, the blind refers to those who are physically blinded (in Jesus’ day often by malnutrition or failure to receive basic medical care) but, by extension, to those blinded by the unjust dealings of the powerful.
- The “oppressed” in verse 19, refers to anyone beaten down because of their differentness.

- “The year of the Lord’s favor” in verse 19 most likely is a reference to the Jubilee year when all debts would be forgiven, all slaves released, and all lands returned to their rightful owners. Though there is no specific evidence in scripture that this practice ever actually was enforced, Jesus makes the claim that he has been anointed to get the job done.

Things to consider:

- ❖ What does this text invite you to think? To feel? To do?
- ❖ Jesus says in this text that he is anointed “to bring good news to the poor.” What do you think is specifically “good news to the poor”? How does it differ from “good news to the rich”?
- ❖ In reading verse 2 of Isaiah 61, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” Jesus leaves out the last part of that verse, “and the day of vengeance of our God.” Is there significance to this omission?
- ❖ Where do you see the eschatological promises of Luke 4:18-19 being fulfilled today? In Lexington? In the United States? In other nations of the world?
- ❖ What are the obstacles you face in preaching the justice aspects of this text?

**BUILD Text Study for Monday, January 25th Shiloh Baptist Church
10:30-11:30 am**

Colleagues: We'll be examining St. Luke 4:21-30 at our text study with the overriding challenge being, "How can I most effectively preach this text in my congregation?" Please bring your Bible and a prayerful spirit! See you on Monday, January 25th. Ron Luckey

An Introductory Word:

"After Jesus takes the scroll, reads the words of the prophet Isaiah, and then delivers the startling announcement that he is the fulfillment of scripture, he pushes the shock index even further. It's not enough to proclaim to the poor, the captives, the hurting, and the oppressed that freedom is now theirs, that their long-awaited Messiah brings them good news. Jesus challenges those around him, people of low social and economic status, to accept others whom even they may have disregarded—the widow, the leper, the foreigner." Verity Jones, executive vice president at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. Quoted in the January 20th 2016 issue of *Christian Century*

Notes on the text:

Verse 21: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." It is important to remember that the people to whom Jesus read the Isaiah 61 text and to whom he made this announcement were the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed described in the Isaiah text. It was good news they were hearing. It is no wonder, as stated in **verse 22** that, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at his gracious words that came out of his mouth."

But then the mood of the congregation changes in **verse 23**, when "He said to them, 'Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, Doctor, cure yourself...'" On the heels of the good news (I have come to set you free from oppression,) comes the bad news (the folks you look upon as unworthy and even untouchable are also included in my mission of liberation.)

In **verses 25-27**, Jesus illustrates from Jewish scripture, two occasions when God performed gracious deeds for "the wrong people."

Verse 30: “But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.” Luke is such a great writer. He crafts this sentence with exquisitely comic irony and understatement. You can almost picture Jesus whistling like he’s on a stroll through the park as he calmly parts the mob much like Moses parts the Red Sea and cheerfully goes “on his way” to do what he was anointed to do, regardless of what the crowd thinks or seeks to do about this inclusive mission that he’s on.

Things to Consider:

- Who was originally being addressed in this text?
- Who is the modern-day equivalent of those originally addressed in this text?
- What is the problem or situation being addressed in the text and what problem or situation is the modern day equivalent?
- What is God inviting us (individually and corporately) to think?
- What is God inviting us (individually and corporately) to feel?
- What is God inviting us (individually and corporately) to do?
- What are the obstacles from preaching this text in your congregation?

BUILD Text Study for Monday, February 1st at Shiloh Baptist Church
10:30-11:30 am

Colleagues: The text under discussion at our text study will be St. Luke 9:28-36.
Please bring your Bible and a spirit of expectancy.

Preparing to address the text

“Today’s reading challenges the preacher to take on the thankless task of addressing our avoidance of and resistance to Jesus’ way of servanthood, solidarity, and nonviolence. We are surrounded...by a culture of upwardly mobile aspirations, willful neglect of the poor, and social and political violence of all kinds. Yet most middle-class Christians in North America have made a strategic *détente* with this world...This makes our churches some of the most difficult places to proclaim the cross as a metaphor of engaging the powers.” Ched Myers, in the commentary Preaching God’s Transforming Justice.

Notes on the text

Verses 28-29b: Luke’s telling of the Transfiguration is different in several significant ways from the versions of Mark and Matthew. For instance, Luke alone sets up the story with the words, “**Eight days after these sayings...**” Both Mark and Matthew also place the Transfiguration story after Jesus’ prediction of his death and his call for his followers to carry the cross. However, only Luke uses the connective phrase “eight days after these sayings.” Luke obviously wants the reader to see what happens on the mountain in the light of what Jesus has said just previously about the cost of discipleship.

“(they) **went up on the mountain to pray.**” Luke is the only one of the Synoptic gospels to make explicit that the reason Jesus and his inner circle went up on the mountain was to pray. As you know from reading Luke, prayer is a favorite theme of Luke’s gospel.

Verse 31: Only Luke reports the content of the discussion between Moses, Elijah, and Jesus when they conferred on the mountain. “They...were speaking of his *departure*, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem.” It is very important to note that the word we translate as “departure” is, in Greek, “ten exodon.” That is, “exodus.” Luke is likening Jesus’ fate in Jerusalem with the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from Pharaoh’s empire. However, Luke is actually reversing the logic of the Exodus story. Whereas Moses led the people away from Pharaoh’s slavery system, Jesus is heading directly toward Pharaoh—the capital of Roman-occupied Palestine—to speak truth to the powers and to face the consequences.

One can only imagine the tone and specifics of the conversation Jesus has with Moses, the liberator and Elijah, the great prophet of the poor, regarding Jesus’ counterintuitive and politically unorthodox strategy.

Verse 32: The disciples were “weighed down with sleep” is another original insertion by Luke into Mark’s original account of the Transfiguration story. If this makes you think of the sleeping disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, most commentators think this is no accident. Luke intends to connect the two episodes as pointing to the need to pray for strength in the face of the

looming confrontation with the authorities. Sleep in both instances is more than just physical sleep. It is to live in denial about what it means to carry the cross.

Verse 33: On the heels of Jesus' conference with Elijah and Moses about his "exodus," Peter suggests a more conventional strategy—"let's stay up here on the mountain where it's safe from 'Pharaoh' down there in Jerusalem."

Verse 34-35: "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!" The way Luke writes, it is as if Peter doesn't really get a chance to finish his thought. The voice from heaven breaks in to tell him to shut up. This can't be read as anything but a firm rebuke to Peter and his timidity in the face of what Jesus plans to do.

Things to ponder

What is the problem or situation being addressed in the text and what problem or situation is the modern day equivalent?

The Transfiguration story occurred with Jesus' words about the cost of discipleship still ringing in the disciples' ears. In a sermon, what are some specific ways the preacher might avoid spiritualizing the Transfiguration and connect it to "carrying the cross"?

Jesus took his inner circle up on the mountain to pray. What part does prayer play in the work of justice?

How does the church—clergy and laity—tend to play it safe as Peter was suggesting (verse 33) in the face of Jesus' call to do justice?

How is this text good news to the poor?