

“The Arrival of God’s New Order”

Date: 7 January 2018

Text: Luke 4:14-22

Rev. Peter Coutts

In the liturgical year today is known as Epiphany Sunday.

“Epiphany” is an interesting word
as it has two very distinct meanings,
and both are quite applicable to us today.

The Christian faith definition of Epiphany is “to be revealed”.

So today we mark how God revealed God’s self through Jesus Christ the son.

But an epiphany is also something we can have ourselves.

An epiphany is to have an illuminating
discovery or realization—to have an “Ahaa!” moment
that can change your point-of-view.

In our text today, we see the first happening (Jesus revealing his mission)
and the second not happening (that is, his listeners didn’t get it).

today is the first sermon in a series
that will explore this mission of Jesus
and its implications for the nature and mission of the church.

At my very core I truly believe
that the times the church in North America
finds itself in today
requires every congregation to reflect deeply
on the nature and mission of the church,
to imagine what faithfulness for the church means today.

So my goal in this sermon series
is to help you have an epiphany:
to have an illuminating discovery... realization...
to have an “Ahaa!” moment
about Christ’s call to the church in general,
that together our imaginations may be prompted
to glimpse what Varsity is called to be in our future,
given the specifics of our time and place.

This is the beginning of our work of writing
the story of our congregation’s next 50 years.

Our passage picks up Jesus' story upon his return home from the wilderness temptation. When he stood up to read scripture in the synagogue there would have been a fair bit of anticipation. This was his home church (if you will). They knew him. And we know that at the young age of 12 Jesus already had a very impressive understanding of the Jewish faith. But come this day his reputation as a teacher was already widely known throughout the countryside. "What was he going to say today?" they would be wondering.

What Jesus read and said that day was intended by Jesus to be shocking, surprising...eye-popping!

I'll read that Isaiah passage with over-the-top emphasis to illustrate the meaning intended by Jesus.

"The **SPIRIT OF THE LORD** is upon **ME** because **God has ANNOINTED ME** to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent **ME** to proclaim freedom for prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

Then, in reflection on the text he said, "**TODAY** this scripture **IS FULFILLED** in your hearing."

Wow!

And what was Jesus saying was being fulfilled?

The brief passage he read is found in the middle of a larger prophecy found in Isaiah 60 and 61, and Jesus' hearers would have known this larger prophecy because it is one of the most hope-filled passages in all the Hebrew scriptures.

The complete passage speaks of how God will restore the Jewish faith community that is living in despair.

It speaks of an unnamed agent of God coming to bring about this restoration.

The portion of the text Jesus read says God's agent would bring "the good news".

The Hebrew word here we translate into English as "gospel".

Isaiah says this agent of God is bringing a gospel
and he was coming to evangelize people
into this belief that the Kingdom of God
would come upon them in a new way,
that it would be rich in God's blessings,
that it would restore the Jewish faith community
and help them to fulfill the mandate that God gave to Abraham:
that the Hebrew people be a light to all nations.
And in the synagogue that day Jesus said in reflection
"TODAY this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."
Wow again!

How did the listeners react to that?
We read,
"All spoke well of him
and were amazed at the gracious words
that came from his lips."
In other words they were saying,
"nice sermon today. Wasn't that a good sermon?
And he's a local boy. His dad Joseph must be proud."
For a third time: Wow.
They did not get it.
But how could they?
What Jesus was implying about the mission of God
and about himself
was so far out...was so far beyond the point-of-view
of his listeners
that it was incomprehensible to them.
It would take Jesus three years
of actually bringing sight to the blind
(as well as performing other miracles)
and of additional teaching
to help some have a personal epiphany:
their "aha!" moment,
their illuminating discovery,
their new realization—a changed point-of-view.

Jesus heard their after-worship chatter
and appreciated that they just didn't get it.
In response he said aloud,
"I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his home town."
Now he was saying,
I'm a spokesperson for God and you aren't hearing me.
And if this wasn't harsh enough
he then went on to say that not everyone
is going to know this new blessing by God.
Now it was upon hearing those words that people got angry,
not what Jesus claimed about himself.
They turned on him and tried to throw him off a cliff!
They really didn't get it.

At that moment in the synagogue
Jesus was declaring that an epiphany was happening:
God was revealing God's nature and mission in new ways
in and through Jesus.
But, at the same time, that other kind of epiphany didn't happen.
People didn't have their "Ahaa!" moment
that would change their point-of-view.
But Jesus knew that if God's mission
was to be realized in the world,
people's point-of-view would have to change.
So that is what he pursued:
changing how people understood God,
the world, their faith, the life of their faith community, life!

Over the next few weeks
we will look at the point-of-view
Jesus wants his listeners to adopt,
but for today I want us to stay just with this idea that an epiphany
can bring a change in our point-of-view.
While we rarely acknowledge it,
we all know we have our own point-of-view.
We also know that point-of-view varies from person to person.
We see differences in them played out daily in the news,

on big issues like politics and pipelines
and on the small issues such as
 that structure of steel and stone on the way out of the city
 called the Beaufort Towers,
 and whether or not it is art?
And, in our honest moments,
we can also confess our human tendency
to simply believe that our own point-of-view is (of course!) the best view.....
when we know that it might not always be the case.

Like so many aspects of human nature
having a point-of-view is simultaneously
a substantial help and a hindrance.
For everyone our point-of-view
operates like prescription glasses (helping you see things more clearly)
and at the same time like blinders on a horse
(limiting what you can perceive).
It was this second reality
that Jesus ran head long into that day in the synagogue.

People have points-of-view.
So does the church and we come by ours honestly.
Our point-of-view was shaped
by an interwoven relationship between church and society
that we called Christendom.
It existed for 1,700 years.
That much time tends to set a point-of-view pretty strongly!
Over the past 60 years Christendom has unraveled,
our society has chosen to make its own way without the Christian faith,
and we have experienced the consequences.
Over the past 6 decades the church had tried
to ignore this reality, deny it,
some branches of the church have railed against it to no effect.
The church has doubled down
on what once worked in attracting people to church
only to discover that people don't seem to care.
We are left feeling lost.

Maybe we need a new point-of-view.

In July of 1961 38 members of the Green Bay Packers football team gathered for the first day of training camp.

Just months earlier this team played in the NFL final.

They were leading in that game until its final moments.

But while they were defeated they were not crushed and so they came to training camp

ready to take their very high level of play to the next level.

When they were assembled in walked their coach, Vince Lombardi.

He picked up a ball, held it out before them and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football."

He carried on teaching the elemental basics of the game—

stuff all these pros learned in their first days of high school football.

Every year Lombardi started training camp with that famous line

and with the assumption that they had to begin with the fundamentals.

He was one of the most successful football coaches of all time.

To continue this thought into an analogy.

The church is on an extended losing streak

and yet we begin each season

with the assumption

that we really know what we are doing.

After all, we've been doing it for 2,000 years now,

mostly successfully.

We're pro's.

But here's the problem:

we want to keep playing the same game we've always played,

but the field has changed and the rules have changed.

I think the approach Lombardi took to training every year of his career

has to become the approach the church takes for a generation.

We have to review the fundamentals, practice the basics,

and learn how to play the game in today's conditions.

Which brings us back to Epiphany and that day in the synagogue.

They were all pro's.

They had been the children of God

since the days of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses...

their faith was codified into a collection of practices

and following those practices was counted as faithfulness.

Jesus message was this: but that was not the intent.
Jesus message is summed up in this verse from Matthew,
“A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart.”
IF we have a heart for God all else flows from it.
In those days the Jews saw everyone who was not Jewish as unclean.
No contact was to be had with Gentiles.
But Jesus reminded them, you are to be a light to the world.
You are to be examples to the world
how God would have all people live.
That was the calling given to you since Abraham.
What stood in the way that day in the synagogue—and throughout Jesus’ ministry—
was the point-of-view of most of the listeners.
And in the end that point-of-view got Jesus killed,
and then that point-of-view was made irrelevant by the resurrection.

So where does that leave us, Varsity Acres Church,
in year 51 of our life?
The majority of us appreciate
that meeting the challenges ahead
means being church differently.
To get there will take an openness
to review our point-of-view about faith and church.
To hear Jesus’ equivalent to “this is a football”.
To go back to fundamentals,
hearing a 1st century message with a 21st century ear.
To consider the question,
“and how do we best live that in this context,
in our time and place?”
This is faithfulness,
and we know God is faithful.
God certainly wants vital,
thriving congregations living out the renewed way
Jesus announced in the synagogue that day.
God wants that for the church today and a generation from now.
God’s on our side in this.

So in the coming weeks let us embrace the line

Jesus said so often at the end of his lessons,
“those who have ears to hear let them hear.”
For if we do,
we as Varsity Acres Church may well have our own epiphany.

“Ahaa!”