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St. John's Episcopal Church
3 Epiphany B10 / Luke 4:14-21 / January 24

The community of Nazareth ~ Jesus' hometown ~ had gathered in the synagogue on a Saturday morning. One could surely *feel* the curiosity hanging in the air. Jesus ~ *their* Jesus, the child who, they watched grow through adolescence and beyond had suddenly and surprisingly become well known in the area ~ and he had come back home for a visit.

The leaders hand Jesus the scroll and he chooses to read the following words from the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor." Now ~ everyone present knew that those words of the prophet applied to Isaiah. And so they leaned in closer, eager to catch a morsel of great teaching that their Jesus had all of a sudden become famous for.

What would he say? What teaching would Jesus *stress* about the prophet Isaiah? Would he, as Isaiah did in his prophecies, emphasize the *bad* news? Or would he, as Isaiah also did in his prophecies, emphasize the *good* news? What would Jesus say? What direction would he go in?

Ironically?...neither one. Jesus doesn't go into the past. He doesn't say to the people of his hometown, "Let me show you where you have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep." He could have! Jesus most certainly could have. To learn from our mistakes, to have our failures pointed out to us especially when we are

unaware, that's one of the ways that the Holy Spirit teaches us and prompts us to ask God for forgiveness and restoration. But Jesus didn't do that. Not now, at least.

At the same time, Jesus didn't speak about future comfort, either! He doesn't say, "I know that you have seen hard times ~ but a day is coming when God will comfort you beyond measure and your troubles will be no more. A day 'where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.'"

Do those words sound familiar? Of course they do. We read them at funeral services ~ we *hear* those words of hope and we *convey* those words of hope to those who are mortally ill. We *need* those words and sometimes *desperately* so. Jesus could have spoken words like that ~ but he doesn't. Not here. Not now.

What Jesus *did* do was to speak in terms of the present. He took Isaiah's words and, instead of applying to them to Isaiah, he applied them to himself. "Today," he said, "Isaiah's scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. 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, and to let the oppressed go free." Jesus was ushering into the world the kingdom of God ~ and the *marks* of the kingdom of God are found whenever good news is brought; whenever captives are being released; whenever the blind receive their sight; and whenever the oppressed are set free.

The reaction of the crowds to Jesus' words was, at best, problematic. They didn't hear what they expected to hear. They expected to hear about God had worked

in their past. They expected to hear about how God was going to work in their future. They *didn't* expect, and most likely didn't *want* to hear about how God was working in their present ~ and especially so since it seemed that their hometown upstart Jesus was putting on airs by applying this reading to himself.

In similar fashion, a parallel between the behavior of the crowds and the behavior of many American Christians today could easily be constructed. Conversations about God usually, it seems, tends to focus on where God's activity has been working in the past and how God will be active in their future. Rarely does the conversation focus on what God is doing in the present. Maybe it's because we are afraid of how the evidence of our witness will be interpreted by others. Jesus shared what was happening in the present moment and you just heard how the worshippers in the synagogue interpreted *his* words. But whatever the reason, the fact remains ~ we tend to focus more on God's activity in the past and the future and not so much in the present.

This phenomenon has recently been seen at work in the aftermath of the earthquakes in Haiti. From the perspective of the past, we heard the voice of a televangelist claiming that the earthquakes were God's punishment on the people of that country for not following God's will. We also heard from a radio commentator who was reported as having urged his listeners not to donate any money for the earthquake victims because they've already donated to Haiti through income taxes. On the other side, in letters to the editor written by people who obviously had never

been to Haiti, we heard that this is a golden opportunity for the United States to step in and completely rebuild Haiti into a modern-day equivalent of California with buildings and homes that can better withstand earthquakes ~ all of which can be achieved, presumably, if the United States would simply pour more money into Haiti's government.

In the pros and cons of talking about the past and future, these are definitely the cons ~ and yet, with the exception of the televangelist's comments, we can also find some small kernels of truth within them. Despite the radio commentator's opinion, Christians are called by their faith to help those who are desperately suffering ~ but we must be wise as to where we apply that help to ensure that our assistance makes a difference in the lives who are needy, not greedy. The values of accountability and honesty must be values that are respected. And yes, a different vision of Haiti is indeed needed, but it is a vision which must be realistic ~ and, to quote a parishioner whose wisdom I am indebted to from last Wednesday's service, that vision must be "bold." Not a vision that consists of "pie in the sky" remarks about what we think other people could or should do ~ but a bold vision which ensures accountability and changes lives.

Having said all that, I could not help but notice ~ and perhaps many of you noticed it as well ~ that the majority of the news commentary concerning Haiti has either focused on the failings of the past or on dreams for the future. Only the *minority* of the commentary has focused on the present and none that I heard focused

on what God was doing in the present. None, that is, until I read a piece written by Fr. David Anderson in the newsletter published by St. Luke's in Darien and I quote:

I was watching television news with my daughter this week, groaning at the procession of mangled bodies on blood-splotted canvas stretchers carried across powdery rubble, lying by the score on the floors of makeshift clinics. We winced and sighed, unable to take much more. Finally we saw rescuers pull a small boy from a pancaked house. He came out with both arms raised in triumph, waving and smiling. "Oh," Maggy said, "I needed that. Needed to see one life saved."

I want you to take that picture that David draws ~ I want you to take the pictures that you have seen in your newspapers and your magazines, from television and from the internet ~ and I want you to think of all the different ways that humanity has responded. I want you to think of the massive amount of funds that have been raised in such a short period of time, here and elsewhere. I want you to think of St. John's own children who, affected by this tragedy, came up with the idea of having a bake sale because it was something they could do to help. I want you to think of the woman who, this week, used all of her food stamps to buy water which she donated. I want you to think of the Episcopal bishop of Haiti who, when offered an opportunity to leave where he was for more comfortable surroundings, said that he would remain in the city of make-shift tents, ministering to and with his people. I want you to think of the medical teams from Hospital Albert Schweitzer and from Doctors w/o Borders and from all over the world who have reached and who are trying to reach Haiti so that they can minister to the suffering. I want you to think of the relief efforts of those

who are sifting through the rubble and who are rescuing the buried survivors ~ think of the picture of the seven-year-old boy, Kiki, who flashed a tremendous smile after being pulled out and who, when asked while he was smiling so broadly, said “I smiled because I was free, I smiled because I was alive.” ... I want you to think of all these things, to imagine all those pictures ~ and then I want you to put that collage of images from Haiti in a frame, to focus on all the faces ~ and then I want you to listen to Jesus’ words again:

I have come 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.

The activity of kingdom of God is not an activity that is confined to the past ~ nor is it an activity that is only meant to be dreamed about as a future reality. The activity of the kingdom of God is a *present* reality. And in the case of Haiti, the kingdom of God and the relief that it is bringing can be seen in the hands, and in the scars, and in the tears of those who are making this reality happen today. To be sure, there is much to be sad about ~ there are problems to repent of and future hopes of which to speak. But at the same time, in the midst of this crisis, there is also much to be thankful for ~ namely, that Jesus’ ministry of ushering in the kingdom of God is an ongoing, continuing ministry, that no disaster can ever stop. It is a ministry of which we are all apart and our participation with Christ in this ministry gives us the best evidence we need to prove to the world that God is still present ~ in the present ~ and forever so. Amen.