

February 26, 2012
Luke 4:14-22
Creekside COB
Pastor Rosanna McFadden

“In Word Indeed”

Purpose: To challenge us to live lives of courageous discipleship according to God’s word.

Preaching can be risky business. It’s difficult to speak to a group of people and to know that they can hear and understand what you’re saying. I’m reminded of the story of a young preacher who, when it was time for the sermon, stood up nervously before the congregation and said, “I don’t think this mic is working.” And the congregation replied, “And also with you.” But as frustrating as it is to preach when people *don’t* understand what you’re saying, it can be even worse when they *do* understand.

Take our scripture reading from the 4th chapter of Luke. Jesus is back in his hometown of Nazareth, back in the synagogue where he grew up and his family still attends. He’s asked to read the scripture from the book of Isaiah, which he does. And he gets the response that every preacher dreams of: everyone is amazed at the gracious words he speaks. Wow! Mary’s kid can really preach; hometown boy makes good. And because the text of the Isaiah scroll from the Hebrew Bible is also in our Old Testament, we know exactly the place where Jesus was reading from -- Isaiah chapter 61 -- and we know that he didn’t read the entire passage. The first part of Isaiah 61 verses 1 and 2 is exactly quoted in Luke: “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, and to proclaim the Lord’s favor.” And Jesus rolls up the scroll and sits down without reading the end of verse 2, which reads “and the day of vengeance of our God.” No wonder the crowd was pleased -- they got the promise of good news,

freedom and God's favor, without having to deal with God's vengeance. But that isn't the end of the story. The dream sermon turns into a preacher's nightmare.

Within 5 verses the crowd in the synagogue is filled with murderous rage -- so angry at Jesus that they take him outside of town to the edge of a cliff to throw him to his death. I told you preaching can be risky business. I invite you to read Luke 4 for yourself, but in effect what Jesus told the people in his home church was this: you're all so self-righteous and pleased with yourselves hearing about the Lord's favor and assuming it's for you. But the truth is, God can come wherever God wants, and God might just ignore you and come to foreigners and outcasts instead." And the folks at the synagogue, understandably, are pretty upset.

For the next five weeks, through the end of March, Team Spirit is focusing worship and Bible study on the Vision Statement for the Church of the Brethren. Ron Nicodemus is part of the Vision Interpretation and Presentation Committee for our denomination, and has brought this statement to our attention. Jean Mann Graber has helped to create the banner that is here on the chancel, and four more banners for the rest of the series. Here is the Vision Statement in its entirety.

**Through Scripture, Jesus calls us to
live as courageous disciples by word and action:
To surrender ourselves to God,
To embrace one another,
To express God's love for all creation.**

This morning I want to focus especially on the first phrase. What does it mean to be called through scripture to live as courageous disciples? This question of encountering God is one which the Church Board and Team Spirit posed to the entire congregation back in November. Do you remember the questions, Where do you find God? Where does God find you? Your answers were very

interesting. The answer given by every response, by every Sunday School class and by every individual was that we find God in nature, or the outdoors. I would absolutely affirm this, both theologically and personally. The Creator God is accessible to everyone, and can be found everywhere. What I worry about though, is people who think that if they see a beautiful sunset and think about God, that's all it takes to live a Christian life, a life of discipleship.

I've had conversations -- and maybe you have, too -- with people who say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious." I'm not sure what that means, it probably means something different to different people, but it's a comment which often comes up in the context of "Why I don't come to church", or "why I don't need to participate in a community of faith." I realize that churches aren't perfect -- how could they be, they're full of *people*. I heard a comedian who said, "I think Jesus is a lot like Elvis. I love the guy, but the fan clubs scare me." But I don't think we can unhook a Christian life from other Christians, or from other people -- as if people or communities don't really have anything to do with spirituality or living a Christian life. Because then Christianity isn't about anything I *do* or how I treat other people, it's only about how I *feel* about God. And when I'm in outdoors in a beautiful place, I like God a lot.

In contrast, there was only one person who responded to the Creekside questions by saying that he or she found God in reading the Bible. (Actually, this isn't technically true -- several people said they find God everywhere, which is a good answer, but pretty general) I can understand this, too. Many of us, myself included, have been taught to think of the Bible as a rule book: a list of do's and don'ts (mostly don'ts); things we should do if we want to be good people, because if we don't, God will be mad at us, or at least feel bad because we're not good enough. We can have a lot of respect, but not much affection, for the Bible -- kind of like a strict aunt who is always watching to see if we step out of line. Someone we put up

with because they're part of the family, but not someone we want to spend much time around.

There's been a lot of news stories this week about sacred texts in different religious traditions. Last week members of the American armed forces in Afghanistan burned several copies of the Qu'ran, setting off violent anti-American demonstrations, which caused the death of two American soldiers and the injury and death of several Afghans. President Obama has issued an apology, but burning the Qu'ran with the trash has strained American-Muslim relations, because a perceived lack of respect for the Muslim holy book. It's never been an occasion for rioting, but in my home, and probably in yours, the Bible is handled with respect, not thrown around carelessly, or stacked under other books. It is appropriate to show respect for this book -- this bound collection of pages which holds the sacred words of our faith tradition. But respecting this book is not the same as showing respect for the Bible. I believe that the way we show respect for the Bible is by reading it and try to live by what it says.

But here's where it gets tricky: no one takes every part of the Bible equally seriously. Let me say that again -- it's important: no one takes every part of the Bible equally seriously. There are people who think it's important to have the Ten Commandments displayed in government buildings, but they would never consider tithing. Some people devote years of volunteer service to disaster relief, but have never invited their neighbor to church. I'm not sure I have met any Christians who have sold everything they have and given the money to the poor. I myself eat pork and shellfish without feeling a bit guilty, even though these things are against biblical dietary laws. I cut my hair (or technically, someone else cuts it) and I speak in church, even though the apostle Paul writes that women shouldn't do either of these things. And yet, I am someone who strives to take the Bible seriously, who is committed to living as a disciple of Jesus, and I want to encourage others to do the same.

So how does scripture call us to be courageous disciples? I believe that rules are important, but they are not an end in themselves. It's possible to follow all the rules and still miss the point of what God wants us to do. Several years ago, the New Life class read a book called *The Year of Living Biblically* by A.J. Jacobs. Jacobs is a secular (non-practicing) Jew, who set out to follow all the rules in the Bible and write about his experience. He met lots of interesting people, and had some crazy stories -- including figuring out how to use the New York subway system when he was not allowed to use a seat that had been used by a menstruating woman; he even came home one day to find that his wife was mad and had sat in every chair in the house. But these experiences did not make him a believer, or a person of faith. As far as I know, once the year was over, he shaved his beard and went back to living a secular life and writing for *Esquire* magazine, with only peculiar memories to mark his encounter with the Bible. Following the rules doesn't mean that we're following Jesus. Remember, Jesus' harshest criticism was for the Pharisees who observed the law but oppressed the poor, who were self-righteous and hard-hearted. Pointing this out to the Jews got Jesus into a lot of trouble. Jesus got away through the crowd that was trying to throw him off a cliff, but Jesus continued to proclaim a life of discipleship -- living both the letter and the spirit of the law -- which eventually led to his execution. Jesus had the courage to commit his life, not just a year or one day a week, to what he believed.

For Brethren, the example of Jesus has been at the center of discipleship and our reading of the Bible. The Bible is more than a set of rules, it is the record of a life which changed the rules forever. Jesus, as we heard in the reading from Luke 4 which we began with, was familiar with the law and the prophets. He quoted the Hebrew Bible frequently, and observed Jewish law respectfully, but his ministry wasn't focused on following Jewish law, it was focused on living into the kingdom of God. Matthew 5:17 says, "Do not think I that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not

to abolish but to fulfill . . . therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never reach the kingdom of heaven.” True righteousness goes beyond the law and acts for the good of all God’s people.

If Jesus is at the center of the Bible, then surrounding the Bible is the Holy Spirit. I’d like you to look at this banner. This Bible, like all Bibles, is bound: this one in cloth, this one in leather. A Bible has a front cover and a back cover, a beginning and an end. It is a bounded document. No new books, letters, or poems have been added for about 1,200 years. What is within these pages is varied and rich and challenging and inspiring. But what is truly transformational about this book is not what it says inside, it’s what happens outside. It is what happens when we open it up, read it, and try to live by those words. Most of our lives as Christians happen outside the boundaries of this building, outside the activities of church. It is not only our words within this place, but also our actions outside of it, which define who we are. The dove in the upper corner of the banner represents the Holy Spirit. I hope you can imagine that Spirit extending beyond the boundaries of this banner, because the Holy Spirit is unbounded. The inspiration of the Spirit cannot be contained in the Bible or in any book; it is the same Spirit which inspired the writing of this holy book, and it continues through history and into our lives today. When we read the Bible and listen for the Spirit, as individuals and together in community, we are empowered us to live as courageous disciples, according to the example of Jesus, for the sake of the world. As Ron said in the children’s story today, we are rooted in the Bible, but the Holy Spirit gives us wings. As courageous disciples, we live in Word in deed, in the Bible through the inspiration of the Spirit. Amen.