

Luke 4:14-21 ^{ESV} ¹⁴ And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and a report about him went out through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. ¹⁶ And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷ And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Nehemiah 8:1-10 ^{ESV} And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. ⁴ And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. ⁶ And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, ⁸ helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. ⁹ They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, ¹ and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. ⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

“Gracious Words”

This past Wednesday I was listening to the CBC around lunch time and the topic of the show was the public response to the network news organizations showing such graphic pictures of the victims of the earthquake in Haiti. One listener phoned in and said that if it is the goal of the networks to traumatize us, they've done a good job of it. Moreover, questions were raised as to whether such graphic pictures would be shown on national television if the earthquake had happened here in Canada. One of the experts on the show blatantly said they would not, that there seems to be a loss of a basic sense of morals, ethics, and appreciation for human dignity when it comes to presenting news from developing nations. We have no qualms in airing things that highlight their weaknesses and vulnerabilities; i.e. their shame. But, their strengths go unmentioned. We do not honour them. To us they are just poor people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds who need us to help them. Our words, our announcements and pronouncements concerning the "poor" are not gracious at all. Very rarely is good news proclaimed to them or reported about them.

The network news representative that was on the show said that the reporters were not going out and looking for gore just to shock everyone. Rather, it really is that bad down there. There is death on every street and street corner. He said the hope is that if we see the real extent of the damage and the trauma that we will be inclined to help to a greater extent. Well, as someone who was glued to CNN's live coverage of Desert Storm in 1991 and who was also bombarded for months with images of the twin towers falling on 9/11, all this sort of news coverage does is at first create widespread public post-trauma shock. Then like young people who have spent too much time playing blood and gore video games, we become desensitized and apathetic towards helping.

Yet, I think we are a culture that is deeply hungry for gracious words and we don't know it. Good news and wholesome programming on the major networks does not draw the advertising dollar. I've no way to find out, but I suspect that advertising slots on the National right now are going for what they cost for primetime reality shows because those who wish to advertise on TV know we are watching to see what is really happening down in Haiti. And, I won't get started on Christian broadcasting. So much of that really has nothing to do with the Gospel of Jesus Christ and is rather just telling people what they want or expect to hear for money.

Gracious words, would we know them if we heard them? Jesus gave some gracious words there in his hometown synagogue and of course we have to remember that they soon got over their amazement and ran him out of town. He claimed to be the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy which read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." Those are Holy Spirit words of grace that give hope. Returning to Haiti for a moment, if Jesus is who he claims to be in this passage, in

essence the bringer of the Kingdom of God, then we should expect that the Kingdom of God, indeed Jesus himself, is at work amidst the rubble down their bringing about real hope. I suspect that there is more grace than we can imagine happening in Haiti right now and more than just stories of people miraculously surviving. Gracious words, words of hope; these are words that say "God is with you. His favour rests upon. He is working on your behalf." These are words that have the real oomph of the presence of God behind them.

As you remember from last week's sermon, the prophet Isaiah (Third Isaiah) first spoke these words to a small remnant of faithful Jews who had just returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon to rebuild it and the temple. These words were part of a longer message to say that God will not rest until he establishes his people so that they are the praise of all nations. The passage we read from Nehemiah gives a bit of insight into their situation. The priest Ezra read to them probably from the Book of Deuteronomy. As he read, other scribes and priests interpreted it to the people. They gave the "sense of it". Nehemiah tells us that the people wept. Why were they weeping?

Why were they weeping? That is an important question with several possible answers. There are some Bible thumper commentators that say they were weeping because the words had convicted them of their sins. There are some who say that after hearing the Law of Moses they were overburdened by it and didn't know how they were going to keep it and thus, questioned why they came back. There are those who say that it was just plain good for the people to hear the Bible read as they had been starving for it. I'm inclined to say that the story of the Exodus touched home with them in a very real way. God had freed his people from slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land. That was very much what they had just been through themselves. God had freed them from exile in Babylon. They had returned to Jerusalem through the Wilderness of Jordan. In his steadfast love and faithfulness, the LORD God had brought his people home. They were weeping for having been struck to the heart with God's love and faithfulness to his people, to them each.

Maybe and I hope you folks have had moments when you are just struck to the heart with how faithful and loving God has been to you. Maybe you have had moments when you've just happened to open the Bible and read or your daily Scripture reading just speaks right to you of God's steadfast love and faithfulness to you, to us. I've had some very clear moments like that which have taught me how to remember it always, indeed feel it. Just to mention two, I remember the wonder I felt early one morning back in my seminary days. I was riding a camel at four o'clock in the morning up Mt. Sinai and looking up at the stars that were absolutely unhindered in by city lights. It wasn't the stars that struck me with awe. It was who and that I was completely undeserving of where God had brought me thus far. I had another moment like that not long after William was born. I was sitting on the living room floor of the manse stretching to go for a run. I looked out the window up to the sky and it was like God himself said "Look where I have brought you." God is faithful and deals with us according to love. That, I believe, is why those people, that faithful remnant, were weeping. So, Nehemiah declared that day to be a day of celebration, of sharing with one another in feasting, indeed sharing of what little they had with one another as if it were the acceptable year of the LORD's favour when it is here on earth as it is in heaven.

But anyway, I have some gracious words for you, as Jesus is in our midst the Spirit of the Lord is upon us. We were once beggars poor in spirit but we have heard the Good News and been made alive in Christ so that we are now rich in the Spirit and anointed to proclaim good news to the poor. We were once captive to sin, death, fear, and hopelessness seeking to establish ourselves. Yet, Jesus has redeemed us at the price of his own life so that we are now free to live as slaves to righteousness, his slaves. Therefore, he sends us to proclaim liberty to the captives. We were once blind to seeing the workings of God in our lives and in the lives of others, but now we see and so he sends us to proclaim the recovery of sight to those who are blind now as we once were. Jesus has set us at liberty from things that oppress us that we might set at liberty those who are oppressed. As in our communion with one another in Christ here we have had a foretaste of the year of the Lord's favour, of New Creation life, life full of the knowing of God, he sends us forth to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. Friends, this is who we are in Christ. The old life is gone. New Creation life has begun in us. We are Christ Jesus' slaves. He bought us at the price of making us alive with his life. He had to go through death to do that. Yet, don't weep because it is good to know the steadfast love and faithfulness of God. We have been given the Day of Celebration freely. Share with one another and all. Go forth and speak these gracious words with your mouths and your lives. Amen.