

--A Bold Move Jesus. January 27th, 2013 First Presbyterian Church of Allegan

Isaiah 61:1-7

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a] to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.⁴ They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations. Aliens will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.⁶ And you will be called priests of the LORD, you will be named ministers of our God. You will feed on the wealth of nations, and in their riches you will boast.⁷ Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs.

Luke 4:14- 21

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed,¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”^[e]

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, **“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”**

Imagine yourself in a Jewish synagogue in Nazareth. One of your own, a home town boy is back in town. You remember him when he was just a young one. You remember when he was so small he couldn't even lift one of the scrolls, let alone hold it up in his hands and read it in front of everyone. Now, bearded and all grown up, he walks up and takes the scroll of Isaiah, as planned from the attendant. It is good to see him come home again.

You know his parents well, his father, Joseph helped you just the other day when you needed one of your tool handles repaired. He is seated over to the right side of the synagogue, proudly watching his son. His mother Mary is also present today, tending some of their other children. You watch with all of these beloved friends and neighbors of yours glowing with pride as Yeshua, (Jesus) begins reading from Isaiah 61.

The passage is a familiar one, but instead of reading the entire thing, in the normal way in which it was written, Jesus turns the passage into a short and powerful declaration. He declares that he is the one who is going to preach good news to the poor, to bring sight to the blind and to set the oppressed people free. And then he simply gives the scroll back to the attendant and goes back and sits down. Every eye in the synagogue is on him. What is Jesus saying? What is he trying to do? Why isn't he finishing

the Isaiah reading about the future coming Messiah? About the year of Jubilee? -The way that he has read the Isaiah passage it sounds like he is saying that he himself, JESUS is the Messiah.

The synagogue is unusually quiet. The normal pattern of how things are supposed to go in worship has been broken. And all eyes are still on Jesus. Then he speaks words that make people stop and ponder. "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Everyone is completely amazed. How could this be? Isn't this Joseph's son? Could he be saying that he is the Messiah? What sort of authority does this young man think that he has? Does he really think that he is going to make a difference in the world?

That Sabbath Morning in the synagogue did not go as the elders there were expecting. --To have one of their own come back and read a scripture in synagogue is one thing, --that is a nice proud moment for Mom and Dad to revel in front of their friends and neighbors about their well spoken children now proudly grown up. But to have Jesus declare that he actually was going to do something amazing, to have him actually stand in front of them all and speak as the long awaited Messiah? That was not at all what they were expecting.

We too can put ourselves in their position. Imagine for a moment

what you would be feeling if it were your child or your grandchild who stood right here in this pulpit and declared that they were going to cure hunger in Allegan? Imagine them saying, "*The Spirit of the Lord is giving me the power to bring justice into our unjust world.*" Imagine the declaring that all of those who were unjustly imprisoned a couple of blocks away in the Allegan County jail would now be set free? Imagine your child or your grandchild saying they could cure blindness? It would all be a bit hard to believe wouldn't it? It wouldn't be anything at all like what you were expecting.

I think that one of the problems with Mainstream religion today is that we have stopped expecting God to actually show up and do something. We become like those people sitting in the synagogue in our reading today, not expecting anything to come of it. We come to church and are satisfied with being very pleased to listen to very nice reading of scripture, we are happy to hear a lovely song being sung and we look forward to biting into a sweet cookie and sitting down and chatting with our friends over coffee after worship; but we don't expect any of the real power of God to actually manifest and make one bit of a difference to anyone. Annie Dillard, a

pulitzer prize winning author has a famous quote to illustrate this point. In her book, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, she says:

On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of the conditions. Does any-one have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake some day and take offense, or the waking God may draw us out to where we can never return.

That is what this passage is all about. Jesus came to this earth in order to declare that comfortable worship and living your life as best as you can isn't going to cut it anymore. It isn't even about doing good deeds and patting yourself on the shoulder at the end of a long volunteer day. Jesus came in order so that you can be in relationship with the God who created the universe. In order so that the power of God can flow into your life and change you and change this world forever. If you open yourself to the

presence and the power of God, if you connect yourself to the God of the universe, absolutely remarkable things can happen.

In 2004 Laura Hatch was having a difficult time as a junior in her Seattle area High School. While outwardly things were going her way at school and she was voted class princess and participated every Sunday in her high school youth group; secretly since she was 15, she had been dabbling with drugs. Her election as the popular class princess was not only due to her beauty, but it had a lot to do with her popularity as a party girl, she was the one everyone called to have a good time with. Even though her parents didn't know it, Laura had also taken to drinking a lot. She was trying to numb her personal shame and emotional pain for a night that she had been date raped that she couldn't bear to tell anyone about. Because she was pretending she was ok, everyone had no idea that she was slowly losing her desire to live.

On Saturday night, October 2nd her sister and a friend talked Laura into going to a party. Laura really didn't want to go, but she let herself be talked into it. Once at the party, she couldn't get over her emotional pain anymore. She locked herself into a hall bathroom and figured out a way to leave without offending anyone. She pretended like she was going to the kitchen to get some food and told her sister she was going home. As she

peeled out of the driveway where the party was, instead of turning her car toward home, Laura turned in the opposite direction; thinking that a drive through the dark countryside and forests would clear her head. As she drove, so many of her thoughts crowded her mind that she stopped paying attention to her driving. As she took a corner way too fast, her car flew off the road and down a steep embankment covered with Douglas Fir trees and blackberry bushes. Suddenly, WHACK! Her 1992 Toyota hit a massive tree. Even though she had buckled her seat belt, the crash threw her into the back seat and sandwiched her in the crushed frame of her car. A searing pain tore through her and she lost consciousness.

When Laura came to her senses a couple of hours later, she knew she was in serious trouble. Her eyes were swollen to tiny slits and she could feel her own blood all around her. She guessed that she had multiple broken bones throughout her body. She tried to open the car door, but it wouldn't budge. Laura was trapped. She assumed that she would die soon, and was ok with that. Her life wasn't worth living anyway.

Once twenty four hours has passed, Laura's parents could report her missing. As the police gathered information about her state of mind, they assumed that Laura had simply run away, and instead a full search, only her family and friends from school and church searched for clues about

where she was. But there wasn't any physical evidence to find. Laura had not braked on that corner. There were no skid marks on the curve, and there was no guardrail there to have been broken. Laura had simply disappeared without a trace. After a few days of being missing, Laura's mom assumed that she was dead.

During her time trapped in the car, and slipping in and out of consciousness, Laura tried to mark the number of days that passed by noting whether it was dark or light outside. On what Laura believes to be the fourth day, Laura called out in desperation to God: "**Lord, I'm really sorry for the mess I've made of my life. I've messed up really bad. Please rescue me or let me die here and go to be with you.**"

Amazingly, Laura heard God speak to her in the depths of her mind, "**You aren't going to die. I will rescue you because I want you to be my disciple, witnessing to my power around the world.**"

On the seventh day that Laura had been missing, the informal search efforts of her family and friends were losing momentum. Laura's friend Bethanne and her mother Shay were also running out of theories and places to look. They both prayed that night to God for help in finding Laura.

That night Shay had a recurring dream about an intersection not far from her home. In addition to the visual image of the location, a voice in

the dream told Shay to "keep going". The next morning, 8 days after the accident, Shay told Bethanne about the location in her dream. The two drove to the area. Bethanne stayed with the car, while Shay inched her way down the steep embankment. Her hopes of finding something melted away. Shay saw absolutely nothing. She called back up to her daughter that she was going to come back up. But her daughter called out, "No! Keep going!" Shay was stunned. It was the same phrase that she heard in the dream although Shay had not told her daughter that detail. Taking that as another sign, Shay kept going further down the rugged ravine. And there, hidden from view behind a thick patch of vegetation, Shay found a mangled car and Laura's lifeless body.

Shay called 911 from her cell phone, and within minutes medics and rescue personnel were scaling the ravine and working to release Laura from her car. At the hospital, Laura was in critical care and the doctors didn't know if she would survive. With the huge blood loss and eight days of no food or water, Laura had lost 40 pounds. A blood clot on her brain and multiple broken bones added to the complications. Two days later, Laura had stabilized enough so that doctors were confident that she would live, but they didn't think it would be likely that she would walk again. But God's prediction proved more true than the doctors prognosis. Three

months later, Laura was walking. A year later she graduated from High School with her class, and she enrolled in a Christian University outside Seattle. In response to Gods instruction for Laura to be Gods witness in the world, Laura submitted her story to Guideposts, where they included it in their 2012 book of real life miracles. Laura isn't certain what God is going to ask her to do with her life, but she is convinced that God is real, and that God is powerful and she knows and expects that God is still doing things through people in this world.

In conclusion, while it may be more comfortable for us to sit here in a beautiful sanctuary and then go on with our usual lives, that is not what we are called to do. It is the God of the universe that we worship. Our God is powerful and has a plan and a purpose for your life and for my life. God's work is about bringing good news to the poor, about standing up against injustice and establishing God's kingdom in this world. Let us all open our hearts to the presence and the leading of God and allow the power of the Holy Spirit to make a difference in this world. Amen.

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