

Engage Bible Study: *Luke 4:31-5:16*

October 24-26, 2011

Last week Luke introduced us to Jesus' public ministry in his hometown of Nazareth. By introducing the good news of the Kingdom of God in relationship to the year of Jubilee Jesus let us know that the new era that he has come to usher in will mean freedom to captives, the cancellation of debts and justice for all. The hometown crowd liked that good news, probably because they assumed that Jesus meant that he would set them free from their oppression under Roman authority. But then Jesus made it clear that he had come to bring salvation, not just to the Jews, but to all people. That wasn't quite so well received by the hometown crowd and they sought to throw Jesus off a cliff...but Jesus just walked through the crowd and went on his way. And that's where we pick up the story today.

Jesus the Exorcist (4:31-37)

Let's start by reading 4:31-47 [READ]. Jesus has returned to the Galilee, specifically to the town of Capernaum which will be his base of operations for most of his ministry. Capernaum was a city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. It was a major Jewish center in the region with significant trade in fishing and agriculture. Many Roman troops were also headquartered in Capernaum and so the city contained many pagan influences. While Capernaum was 20 miles north of Nazareth it was also significantly down in elevation, which is why the text says that Jesus went down to Capernaum.

In the section we're going to look at today Luke offers six vignettes from Jesus' ministry. Not only will we see the diversity of Jesus' ministry – teaching, preaching, healing, exorcising demons and calling disciples – but we'll also see the immense favor that Jesus carried from the crowds.

In this first vignette Jesus is once again attending synagogue services and his words stir up a demon within one of the worshipers. It's no surprise that Luke would start with an encounter between the Messiah and a demon because the Jews believed that when the Messiah came he would crush the powers of evil. Belief in demons or evil spirits was widespread in the ancient world. Demons were said to inhabit deserts, large bodies of water, the air and the subterranean regions. When they entered a person they were considered to be the cause of blindness, muteness and all kinds of physical problems as well as mental disorders. Since demons are from the supernatural world it's no surprise that this demon recognizes Jesus for who he is, the Holy One of God. And since Jesus announced that the new reign of God upon the earth would mean freedom to captives it's also no surprise that Jesus would set this man free from the demon that possessed him. And the demon seems to recognize that Jesus's presence means a serious threat to the entire demonic realm. When the demon says, "Let us alone! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?" The "us" being referred to is the demonic realm. Jesus, Luke has told us, has come in the power of the Spirit, and the Spirit of God is greater than the spirits of this world.

However, the exorcism isn't the main focus of this story...and this is an important bible study tip to learn. Please notice how Luke frames this story. He begins in verse 32 telling us that the people are amazing at the authority with which Jesus taught. And in verse 36, after the exorcism, notice what Luke tells us, "*They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!'*" The exorcism is not Luke's main focus here. The power and authority of Jesus' word is the focus. The exorcism is merely the first opportunity to reveal that power and authority.

Jesus is a teacher of the word of God and that word has power. In the same way that God spoke creation into being, Jesus is able to cast out demons with a word. Power and authority are two separate but connected words. The Greek word for power is “dynamis”, the same word for which we get the word “dynamite”. Power refers to the fact that Jesus’ word gets stuff done. It has impact. The Greek word for authority is “exousia” and it refers to the fact that Jesus’ power comes from God and is approved by God. No wonder the people are amazed at his teaching, and the demons tremble in his presence and are cast out by his word.

Jesus the Doctor (4:38-41)

But it isn’t just the demons over which Jesus has power. The next vignette, Luke 4:38-41, lets us know that Jesus also has power and authority over sickness [READ]. It’s interesting that Luke assumes his reader, Theophilus, knows who Simon is because Simon is given no introduction here. Simon, of course, is Peter. Peter was such a prominent leader of the first century Church that Theophilus must have known of him. You’ll also notice that no introduction is given to the “they” who ask Jesus about Simon’s mother-in-law. In Mark’s Gospel we’re told that the “they” are James and John. It seems that Theophilus knew this also. It’s also interesting to consider the reality that Simon Peter was a married man! What did she do while Simon traveled with Peter? Did she accompany them? Was she one of the women that helped to support and serve Jesus and the disciples? We just don’t know!

What we do know is that Simon’s mother-in-law was sick with a high fever. A high fever was potentially life threatening in the ancient world and so the disciples asked Jesus if he could do something for her. And notice how Jesus heals her. He “rebukes” the fever, which is exactly what he did with the demon in the last story. Once again Luke is showing us the power and authority of Jesus’ word. And notice the healed woman’s response. Out of gratitude (we assume) she gets up and serves Jesus.

The sun begins to set, signaling the end of the Sabbath (the Jewish day started at sundown) and so people are legally allowed to walk further distances and carry burdens...like their sick relatives and friends. Word about Jesus spread quickly and so people brought all sorts of sick and possessed people and Jesus healed them all. He also continued to cast out demons that recognize him as the Son of God...but Jesus silences them. Why? It could be that Jesus doesn’t want to be known as a faith-healer. He will not reveal the kind of Messiah he is until the cross. Or it could be that it isn’t fitting to hear a testimony from a demon. Either way, Jesus has already begun to deliver on his promise to set right what is wrong in this world, to restore that which sin has destroyed.

Jesus the Proclaimer of Good News (4:42-44)

Let’s finish up this chapter by reading 4:42-44 [READ]. It’s new day and Jesus begins his day by going to a deserted place. We assume that he’s gone there to pray, and we can imagine how exhausting the previous evening had been. But we can also imagine that the people were memorized by Jesus and couldn’t get enough of him, and so they searched for him, found him and wanted to keep him around. Who could blame them?

A couple of summers ago I was biking through Iowa and came to a town that was offering \$5,000 to anyone who could help recruit a primary care physician to move into that town. They wanted a doctor, not just for the people of that town but as a tool to recruit new businesses and new residents to the town. Just imagine how much more the people of Capernaum wanted Jesus. If anyone got sick, he could heal them. If a demon invaded the town or an individual, Jesus could exorcise the demon. What’s not to like?

But healing and exorcising demons wasn’t the “main event” for Jesus. It was a means to an end, a way of revealing what God was up to in Jesus...ushering in a whole new Kingdom of God’s rule and reign. And that’s

just how Jesus responded to the people when they tried to hold him, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose." Jesus proclaims that good news with both words and actions.

I want you to notice again how Jesus defines the good news, the gospel...it's the proclamation that the kingdom of God is at hand, that God's reign has broken into this world ushering in a new era right here and right now. That's very different from how many Christians frame the good news, "You're bad, God's mad and so you'd better believe that Jesus died for your sins or you're going to hell." It has implications for today, not just for after we die. God is up to something now, and we're called and empowered to be a part of it. And Jesus is going to make that clear in this next section.

Jesus the Master Fisherman (5:1-11)

Before diving into this story turn in your bible to John 21. Notice the resemblance? In John this is a post-resurrection story and marks the beginning of Peter's restoration. In Luke this story serves as the calling of Peter and the disciples. I suppose it's also possible that this fishing miracle happened twice.

Another clue that Luke is probably borrowing material for this story comes in the location mentioned...the Lake of Gennesaret. That's another name for the Sea of Galilee where the previous vignettes took place. Why would Luke suddenly use a different name for the same body of water? Perhaps because that's how the original source story had it.

In any event Jesus is now so wildly popular that the crowds are about to drive him into the water because they are so anxious to hear him teach. And Jesus sees two empty fishing boats on the shore. The fishermen have fished all night and are now cleaning their nets. Jesus gets into Simon's boat...because he already knows Simon...and asks to be rowed out a bit from shore so that he can teach the crowds. Ever notice how well sound travels across water? I was at a friend's lake cabin this past summer and one evening I was sitting on the dock looking into the night sky. Across the lake, which was a least a third of a mile away, there was a family gathered around a campfire. I could easily hear and understand their conversation despite the fact that they were speaking at normal volume. Jesus brilliantly uses this to his advantage to teach the crowds.

When he was done teaching he told Simon to head out into deep water and let his nets down. Now, catch irony here. A carpenter's son and itinerant preacher was telling a professional fisherman that it was time to fish. Not only was it still daylight...not the right time to fish...but Simon even told Jesus that they had come up empty the night before. But Simon still does what Jesus asks. And, of course, their nets come up so full that they are nearly bursting. Simon calls his fishing partners out and the catch nearly sinks their boats.

Simon's reaction here is fascinating. He suddenly senses that Jesus is a man of God like no other, and this realization causes Simon to reflect on his own sinfulness. And so he falls at Jesus' knees and tells Jesus to depart from him. How could anyone so godly want anything to do with someone so sinful? Simon feels terribly unworthy. What Simon fails to grasp is something we, too, often fail to grasp – that admitting our own unworthiness, humbly confessing our own sinfulness and inability to serve God is the best prerequisite for service...because then it is painfully obvious how dependent we are and must be upon God's grace and power.

Jesus responds to Simon, "Do not be afraid." You may remember from Dr. Lose's sermon that that's a phrase that always signals good news. When you hear "Do not be afraid" something good is about to follow...as opposed to "woe unto you"! And something good does follow. Jesus says to Simon, and by extension to James and John, "From now on you will be catching people". Notice that Jesus didn't extend an invitation. He made

statement. And sure enough these simple fishermen drop their nets, leave everything behind, and follow this remarkable man who speaks and acts with power and authority. Who wouldn't?

And notice that this call of the first disciples happens as Jesus is becoming more and more popular. The implication is that Jesus will need some help spreading the good news. We, too, are invited to follow and become fishers of people.

Jesus the Reconciler (5:12-15)

And just in case you think you're just too unclean, too unworthy to serve the Lord we'll close with one final story – Luke 5:12-15 [READ]. The real power of this story begins when we understand leprosy in ancient Judaism. In reality this word was used to refer to any number of skin diseases that were thought to be highly contagious. Jewish law required that anyone with such a skin disease must live apart of all "clean" people. As a leper walked along he or she had to cry out "Unclean!" so that people could avoid them. More than just a physical condition leprosy was a social disease. It had a similar impact to what AIDS had in the early 1980's. Listen to what it says in Leviticus regarding lepers:

The person who has the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, "Unclean, unclean." He shall remain unclean as long as he has the disease; he is unclean. He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp. – Leviticus 13:45-46

This explains why, when Jesus encountered this leper, the leper bowed his face to the ground. His shame would have been profound. And yet still he has enough gumption and faith to beg Jesus for healing. And notice how the request is stated, "Lord, if you choose you can make me clean." What's at issue here is not Jesus' capability but his willingness. Will Jesus also be repulsed by this man? Will he be obedient to the Law of Moses? But Jesus doesn't just heal the man with a word. He touches him. Think about that! Jesus reaches out and touches the untouchable! And the man is healed.

Jesus then gives the man two instructions. First, Jesus tells the man to tell no one about what happened. Again, if Jesus is known only as a faith-healer people will be robbed of understanding the fullness of the mission that Jesus came to accomplish as outline in Isaiah 61...the Year of Jubilee! Second, Jesus tells the man to show himself to the priests so that he can be declared clean and re-enter society. We can assume that the leper followed Jesus' second instruction, but failed utterly to obey the first. Word about Jesus spread everywhere so that he was more and more inundated by people in need of healing. And Jesus' response was to regularly withdrawal to secluded places to pray. Verse 16 literally says, "But he was withdrawing in deserted places and praying." This was Jesus' pattern and habit.

So, Jesus is revealed as the one who has come to set people free from all that holds them captive and everything that isolates them from one another. Jesus restores and reconciles people physically, spiritually and socially. And so this section raises at least two questions for us:

1. What is it that holds you captive physically, spiritually or socially? Perhaps it's bitterness over something someone has done to you. Perhaps it's a physical or mental ailment. Maybe it's a pattern of sinful or addictive behavior. Whatever it is entrust it to God, and I would encourage you to get connected with a lay minister here at Prince of Peace who can walk with you and pray for you as you seek healing.
2. Jesus' response to Simon and to the leper make is abundantly clear that one is too broken, too sinful or too inexperienced to be used by the Lord in service. Only independence – thinking that we can do it on

our own – disqualifies us. As the old saying goes, “God doesn’t call the qualified, he qualifies the called.” How are you serving God’s mission of restoration and reconciliation? How are you fishing for people, trusting in God’s grace to make you effective?