

The Jesus Agenda – Luke 4:14-21

Farmville Baptist Church

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What is an agenda? We hear that word a lot, and it gets used in a lot of different ways. In high school I was issued an agenda, which was just a spiral-bound daily planner synced with our school calendar. I've prepped agendas for meetings that I had to chair, both at the church and with the Baptist General Association of Virginia. You've probably set agendas too – in a family meeting, in a corporate setting, in a social gathering that you were leading. We hear about agendas from our political leaders, and we complain about the agendas of people who we disagree with or maybe just don't understand.

There are plenty of other words for agenda: platform, plan of action, mission, or manifesto. Whatever word we

use, we really just mean a thought-out, usually central or core, value or set of values that have implications for action – a reliable guide for what we are going to do. If I say my agenda is to make everyone around me excited about Hokie football, I have a pretty clear direction to go – a steep hill to climb, to be sure, but a clear path to follow. When you hear that agenda, you know what I’m all about, at least when it comes to college football. There’s no wondering where I stand.

The same could be said of Jesus in Luke 4. Here, right after his baptism and his temptation, Jesus returns to his hometown synagogue – his home church, as it were. The last president of my seminary, Linda McKinnish Bridges, reminds us in her commentary on this passage that “Jesus enters the familiar synagogue, where he has attended with his family as a young child. He knows the people; he knows

their faces. He can call many of them by name. Perhaps they are even aunts and uncles, cousins, and dear family friends in the small, local synagogue of his hometown.”¹ ~~_____~~

~~_____~~ ^{At} ~~_____~~ the very start of his ministry, Jesus kicked things off with a hometown sermon – and that sermon summed up his agenda in Luke’s Gospel.

The agenda wasn’t something he came up with on his own. Indeed, the words he spoke that day were found in the sacred scrolls, the religious writings, of the Jewish people. And they weren’t some obscure part of the text. They were from Isaiah: the prophet of God, the advisor to kings, the arbiter of challenge and hope alike. The people in the synagogue that day had heard Isaiah before – many times before. And the passage Jesus read that day was a passage dripping with anticipation. A religious group of that time

¹ Feasting on the Word, Exegetical, 285

period, the Qumran community – affiliated with the Dead Sea Scrolls – saw this passage as a “description of the Messiah who was to come.” To them, and to many who had encountered their teachings, this passage is a “messianic job description.”²

So just what were the elements of that job description, the “planks” of Jesus’ platform? After all, if we are his disciples – if we are trying to imitate him and follow his path through life – we might want to know what guiding goals were at the center of his vision for life.

First, we note that the idea for this wasn’t something Jesus pulled out of thin air, or even just plucked out of the Scripture that day in the synagogue. This is the agenda given to him by the Spirit of God. “Messiah” – the title for the person who would do these sorts of things at the direction of

² Feasting on the Word, Exegetical, 287

God, the title that Christians hold was fulfilled and redefined in Jesus – “Messiah” is someone anointed for a purpose. His purpose, given by God, was to do the things he reads here.

The Messiah

~~It~~ is to bring good news to the poor. At all times in human history, there have been poor people living in every society. The ubiquity of the poor in our midst often makes us a bit hardened to the reality – but poverty is a crippling life for most. Being economically poor – however that is defined in our society – means that certain advantages and opportunities are unavailable. Security is limited or non-existent; education is often unattainable; our lifelong chances for improvement and our health can be significantly damaged. The stress and uncertainty that is the norm for those who live in poverty is so constant that it can cause mental anguish and physical manifestations, and the fabric of human relationships, like spousal, parental, and

neighborly connections, can become frayed or even nonexistent. Poverty is all around us – and it is a tragic reality.

But, we may say, what does that have to do with us? I'm just one person, after all, and I give a few bucks to charity. What more can I do? And didn't Jesus himself say, "The poor you will always have with you?"

Yes, he did – but that doesn't mean that's the way he wants it to be. We know this because all the way back in Deuteronomy, the book of the Laws of God to Moses and the Israelites, we read, "There need be no poor people among you."³ Why? Because God provides for his people with abundance – and if his people use what God has given them in the way Deuteronomy lays out, with openhandedness and overwhelming generosity, then poverty will be a thing of the

³ Deuteronomy 15:4

past. This was a teaching in much of the Old Testament law, this was a constant challenge and critique of the people of God by the prophets like Isaiah, and here, as he lays out his agenda, Jesus begins by saying he has been anointed or charged “to bring good news to the poor.”

He also quoted the prophet as saying God’s Spirit had sent him “to proclaim release to the captives” and “to let the oppressed go free.” Captivity and oppression, like poverty, were rampant social realities in the time of Jesus. People could be imprisoned or taken captive for criminal activity, of course, but also for unpaid debts, enslavement, or capture in war. Those so incarcerated or enslaved received little thought from the powerful, and no legal protections or mitigation of the physical and psychological trauma of their captivity. This was merely one of the avenues oppression could take in the ancient world; there was also extreme

taxation, heavy-handed military occupation, no ability to exert agency over one's own life through the political process, and – for women and many who by an accident of birth and geography were excluded from the miniscule percentage of society with any degree of importance – ^{there}_{was} widespread abuse, neglect, and cruelty. Some in today's world claim oppression or persecution for not having every wish fulfilled or personal preference catered to; in Jesus' day, oppression was concrete, gritty, and horrific on many levels, and no one had to stretch their imagination to bring an accurate picture of oppression to mind.

To those suffering under captivity or oppression, Jesus begins his ministry with a simple pledge: I've come to bring freedom. "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free." Think about what that promise by Jesus means. Being captive or suffering

oppression is limiting, crushing, and depressing. It's hard to hold on to hope while someone has their boot on your neck, sometimes literally, but even metaphorically. To suffer captivity or oppression from domineering people or systemic evil is soul-crushing. To those who suffer, Jesus brings good news. His advent among his people – and his ongoing presence through the work of the people of God and the Spirit of God – brings new hope and freedom in many forms.

We skipped over one plank of Jesus' platform a moment ago, because captivity and oppression are so closely connected. Jesus also reads in Isaiah that the Spirit of God sends him to proclaim "recovery of sight to the blind." Thinking of Jesus' miracles, this is perhaps the piece of his agenda we may see most evidently on display. There's story after story of Jesus restoring sight to the blind or giving sight for the first time. And on its own, this is both incredible and

desperately needed; there were many things then that could cause blindness that modern medicine has mitigated to a great degree, and blindness was an even greater disability to live with then than it is now. Restoring or granting sight to the physically blind was – and remains – a way of blessing others who suffer in some way, and it is godly work.

But the image of “blindness” in the Scriptures is never *just* about physical sight.

In the prophets, those who did not understand the way of God or live out their responsibilities as God’s people were considered blind, particularly if they were responsible for providing leadership to the community of the faithful.⁴ In Matthew’s Gospel, we hear Jesus criticize the Pharisees and other leaders who failed to faithfully instruct God’s people by calling them blind guides; “If the blind lead the blind, both

⁴ Zeph. 1:17, Deut. 29:4, Deut. 28:29, Is. 43:8

will fall into a pit.”⁵ Paul used the image of blindness as a metaphor for those who did not grasp the Good News of Jesus, and 1 John says that “anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.”⁶ Simply put, then as now, there were plenty of folks who just didn’t see what God was doing, either through willfulness or ignorance, and to them Jesus said, “I’m going to open your eyes. That’s part of why I’m here.”

All of this seems to have been wrapped up in the final image from the Isaiah reading: the year of the Lord’s favor. The year of God’s favor, or the Jubilee year, was a part of the ongoing rhythm of life God decreed for his people. In the cycle of yearly festivals and triennial offerings and sabbath

⁵ Mt. 15:14b

⁶ 1 John 2:11

years, there was the Year of Jubilee. Described in Leviticus 25, it was a period every fifty years when the scales were reset and the society of God's people was balanced. Land – the main form of wealth at the time – was redistributed back to the original holders; debts were cancelled; slaves were freed; and the hard labor that was the lot in life of almost everyone was to be set aside. It was a year of joy and of restoration from all the misfortune and bad choices that had befallen folks since the last Jubilee.

And this, Isaiah says and Jesus reads, is why the Spirit of the Lord has sent God's Messiah.

Let's sit with that for a moment: Jesus came to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Then "he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this

scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”⁷ With those words, spoken in front of his hometown congregation, Jesus publicly and definitively tied himself to Isaiah’s agenda – or, as it was now understood, the Jesus agenda. In doing this, he opened himself up to criticism – we’ll see that happen immediately next week, where the implications of what Jesus said led the congregation to threaten his very life. But Jesus also threw down a pretty significant marker for his friends and neighbors, his disciples, his opponents, his listeners, and (eventually) us to clearly understand something: the way of God, and a significant core of the Good News Jesus came to bring, was not about what happens to us when we die. I want to be very clear on this – the Good News of Jesus has eternal implications. But I want to be equally clear: Jesus seems to have cared a great deal about what happens in this

⁷ Luke 4:21

life and, especially, what happens to those with the least power to protect themselves or find a path forward. The agenda of Jesus Christ, at least as he declared it that day in Nazareth, is an agenda of grace, mercy, and justice – those things we touched on last week – but especially grace, mercy, and justice for those that the world treats badly, neglects, takes advantage of, or abuses. God is the god of the poor and the oppressed, and Jesus chose as his life’s mission to bring good news of a way of life that would be of benefit, a blessing, for the poor, the oppressed, the captive, and the blind. Jesus came to bring about the time of the Lord’s favor.

Let’s sit with that for a moment.

Then, let’s think about what that means for us.

We are called to follow Jesus, to imitate him, and to let his Spirit fill our lives and guide our steps. As the anointing

of God's Spirit led Jesus to claim this passage from Isaiah as his mission – for him to say “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” – so too the Spirit given to God's people at Pentecost anoints us to center this set of priorities, this agenda, in our lives. This is true for each of us as individual followers of Jesus – we are to be people whose presence in the lives of others and in our communities can be understood as good news for the poor, that works to free captives and the oppressed, that tries to help those who don't see God's loving way come to see it more clearly in a world where lots of unloving messages are battling for the allegiance of us and those around us. It is also true for us as a church, a congregation, a gathered community of God's people united around Christ. If the agenda of Jesus Christ isn't our central focus as a congregation of Christ's disciples – then what are we here for? What are we doing? Are we

just a social club, reinforcing the status quo? Or are we imitating Jesus?

Unfortunately, far too often, the church of Jesus has chosen to ignore or even actively reject his stated agenda, or at least the portion we find here in Luke's Gospel. And by "church" here, I mean the church across time – but also the church in very specific instances, including in our own town and community, including in our own sanctuary, including in my own heart and probably yours as well. We have neglected the poor, we have refused to listen to the concerns of the marginalized, we have called on the oppressed to not want basic human rights, we have turned a cold shoulder to those who face difficulty and mistreatment because of physical, mental, or emotional conditions. At the same time, we have supported the proud, the arrogant, the greedy, and the powerful, because it benefited us to do so. We claim to be

the body of Christ, the group of people charged with carrying out his mission here on earth – and yet, we haven't exactly proclaimed "the year of the Lord's favor" to the people he *explicitly said* he was coming to bring that good news to. I've failed to do that. You've failed to do that. And we're not alone – Christians, particularly Christians in privileged positions around the world and throughout history, have done this.

I was reminded of this earlier in the week. On Monday, we observed Martin Luther King, Jr., Day. Several years back I chose a personal way of honoring Dr. King each year. Among his many letters, addresses, speeches, and sermons, his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* always struck me most – because it was a word of challenge I needed, and always need, to hear. You see, it was a letter written, from a jail cell where King was imprisoned with other nonviolent protestors

challenging the unjust and unsupportable practices of the segregation laws in Birmingham, Alabama – and it was written to people just like me. White moderate pastors and other clergymen, folks who, by and large, recognized the injustice of the situation, and sympathized to varying degrees with their Black neighbors, but could not condone any strong push for civil rights, even on a basic level, if it created discomfort for those in power or upset the community's apple cart. This group of moderate white clergy published a letter calling on King and his supporters to reject public protest in favor of less public, and less effective, methods.

In reply, King published an open letter detailing the reasons for his actions and the actions of others, drawing explicitly from his Christian faith. He also expressed his disappointment in his white brothers and sisters in Christ

who had failed to live out their commitment to the Jesus agenda – my words, not his. His words were,

“In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of a racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: ‘Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.’ And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.”

He went on to say,

“Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church’s silent – and often even vocal – sanction of things as they are. But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early

church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century.”⁸

The sad truth is that Dr. King’s words strike me today with conviction – for myself, for this congregation, and for the wider church – because we continue to fall short of embracing the Jesus agenda as our own, not just on issues of racial justice, but on many, many fronts. The question for us, in the twenty-first century, is whether we are proclaiming good news to the poor, freedom to the captive and the oppressed, recovery of sight to the blind, and the time of God’s favor? Are these things being fulfilled by Jesus, through us? Are we living by the Jesus agenda?

⁸ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*.