

Nehemiah 8:1, 3, 5–6, 8–10
Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

There have been a number of memorable presidential inaugural speeches. John Kennedy declared, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country." Franklin Roosevelt, who came into the presidency in the midst of the Great Depression declared, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." And Abraham Lincoln, in his second inaugural address, one that was given when the Civil War was on its way to the end, and about one month before he was assassinated, declared: "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." These inaugural addresses would set the tone or the theme of a presidency.

This morning's New Testament reading can be considered Jesus' inaugural address. Prior to this passage Jesus was baptized. Then he is driven out in the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Now he begins his ministry. First stop: the synagogue at Nazareth, where he grew up. And here he gives his inaugural address which sets the tone and theme of his ministry. He quotes from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

"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,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

“The year of the Lord’s favor” is a reference to the year of the Jubilee. The year of the Jubilee occurred every fifty years. In that year all the land was to be given a year of rest, a fallow year. Debts were to be cancelled. Any Israelite who had become an indentured servant was to be set free. And any of the ancestral lands that had been sold out of financial necessity would be returned to those to whom God had originally allocated the land when the Israelites entered the land. Land was the source of one’s long-term livelihood, so one did not sell land just to make a profit. If a family lost their land, it pretty well guaranteed their death. Of course, the implementation of this law would result in economic upheaval. But that was the point. The law prevented the accumulation of wealth—especially capital in the form of land—in anyone’s hands. Thus, once in a lifetime the entire economy would be given a fresh start. Jesus saw his ministry in terms of social and economic justice.

The theme of social justice, economic justice, is a theme found throughout the Bible. God redeemed Israel by freeing them from their political oppression as slaves in Egypt. The people were instructed in the laws of the Old Testament to protect the poor, the marginalized, and the vulnerable. The Old Testament prophets condemned those who oppressed others and demanded justice. Earlier in Luke, we find the Song of Mary, the Virgin Mary’s Magnificat. In the Magnificat, we find again a reference to turning economic structures upside-down:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

In these words from the prophet Isaiah, Jesus claims what is the purpose of his ministry, his mission statement, his agenda. His purpose should guide the church today

in understanding its purpose. In 2002, Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, one of the most influential megachurches in America, wrote the book *The Purpose-Driven Life*. By 2007 he had sold over 30 million copies. Many churches held Purpose-Driven Life studies and events. Each chapter of his book is filled with all kinds of Biblical citations. One source says that there are maybe over 1,200 Biblical verses and quotes in the book. There are six major sections in the book that cover the topics of worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and mission. But never once is Luke 4 quoted in his book. Should not our purpose, should not the purpose of the church, be informed by how Jesus saw his purpose. What about the phrase “What Would Jesus Do?” It was a very popular phrase back in the 1990s. It was often abbreviated and was a moral imperative for many Christians. That moral imperative includes good news for the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, free the oppressed, and declare the Lord’s jubilee year. Is the church proclaiming it?

Dr. Robert Parham, a Southern Baptist, wrote, “Luke 4:18-19 is one of the most ignored, watered down, spiritualized or glossed-over texts in many Baptist pulpits, evading or emptying Jesus’ first statement of his moral agenda.” Dare I add that this happens not only in Baptist pulpits. He went on to write:

Jesus said the gospel was for the poor and oppressed, speaking to those at the margins of society. Jesus was announcing that he came to liberate from real oppressive structures the marginalized—the impoverished, the war captives, the poor in health, the political prisoners. Jesus came to turn the economic structures upside down, instituting the year of Jubilee when crushing debts were forgiven and slaves were freed.

It is important to note the reaction of the people a few verses after our passage ends. His words created such a reaction that the people became hostile to him and wanted to kill him, but he escaped. Jesus words were a disruption to the status quo, and

whenever that happens, people can react negatively. God's agenda is frequently not very popular. And it continues not to be popular. Many have been criticized for preaching justice.

These words Jesus spoke are a quote from the prophet Isaiah. These words are found in the first few verses of chapter 61. When Isaiah wrote these words, the people of Israel were under the oppression of the Babylonians. The Babylonians had conquered Israel. When Jesus spoke these words, Israel was under the oppressive colonization of the Romans. This is all very challenging to those of us who are not among the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, or the imprisoned. It is threatening for us to think about the turning upside-down of economic structures from which we benefit. And I include myself in that. This passage can make us a bit uncomfortable. It is interesting that when Jesus quoted Isaiah 62, he left out a phrase, "and the day of vengeance of our God." There, the passage reads, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God." Jess left out "and the day of vengeance of our God." Jesus focuses on bringing healing and justice, not vengeance. ?We too need to focus on healing and justice, not vengeance.

The killing of black men by white police officers, the widening gap between the wealthy and the poor, the middle-class being squeezed out, what would Jesus say? The richest 1% of the people in the United States now own more than the bottom 90%. The average employee needs to work more than a month to earn what the CEO earns in one hour. We hear that the economy is improving, and yet 95% of economic gains went to the top 1% net worth. In such a world, what would Jesus say?

And in the temple of the Lord,
the people of God say: Glory! Amen.