

The Mission

Isaiah 61:1-4

It was a kind of homecoming for Jesus. After jumpstarting his teaching and healing career out in the countryside, Jesus was coming back to Nazareth with his disciples. He was going to speak at the synagogue on the Sabbath. Everyone turned out to see the local boy made good.

The scripture for that day in synagogue was the same as today's scripture reading—a portion of Isaiah 61. Jesus read just the first verse and small portion of the second, though there were no verse numbers in Bible then! And that reading from Isaiah by Jesus, as story was told in Luke's Gospel, has become one of core values of Christian faith. It became, in effect, Jesus' own mission statement.

God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of God's favor

This passage from Isaiah was directed to the Jewish people near the end of their Babylonian exile. It was written to those preparing to return to Jerusalem and rebuild. The year of the Lord was the year of homecoming. The mission was

To provide for those who mourn in Zion
To give them a garland instead of ashes,
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,
The mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
To build up the ancient ruins [and]
Raise up the former devastations;
Repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations

Everybody in Nazareth knew what this passage was about—how much they had suffered and how God would reward them for having suffered, and would hold those other nations accountable and punish them.

It would have been just fine if Jesus hadn't kept talking—and isn't that always the way! But it was not enough just to read the passage in synagogue. You had to teach it as well, just like in church today. And Jesus taught it by first claiming it as his own. He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And folks responded, "That's pretty good." They liked it. The carpenter's kid from across the tracks could talk pretty good! They could be proud of him. His mom could be proud of him.

But Jesus didn't stop there. The second thing he did was, in effect, to say that this mission I'm on is from God and it's not quite what you think. I'm not here to cater to your pride as the chosen people or to reinforce your feelings of being treated unfairly. I'm here to call you to step up to your mission. Remember Elijah the prophet? During the time of draught, God didn't send him to help widows in Israel, but sent him to a widow in land of Zarephath. And she got what she needed. And Elijah's successor, the prophet Elisha, he didn't heal any of the lepers of Israel, but only Naaman from Syria

And, boy, that really ticked those people off! Jesus was calling them out and they didn't like him telling them that the mission was not primarily to bind up their own wounds or hear that they were free from their captivity or released from their imprisonment. He was telling them that, in fact, their captivity was emotional and spiritual, and largely of their own making—that their mission was to get into gear, to minister to all those

outsiders, those outside their comfort zones, those whom the good folk of Nazareth might have considered untouchable. And in response, Jesus' friends and neighbors tried to throw him off the nearest cliff!

The author of Isaiah wrote his words to encourage a people imprisoned, oppressed, and brokenhearted—to bring them hope and the promise of homecoming. Jesus used Isaiah's words both to identify his mission and to challenge a people stuck in their rut of needing to feel unique. To us today, to this congregation, these words remind us to actually be who we say we are: a community where the Spirit lives, a place of hope, healing, and freedom.

More than a decade ago, Crossroads Church adopted several core values around the time of its inception. One of them says:

We acknowledge the Lord's requirement of us as individuals to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before God. Therefore, we encourage and support individuals within our congregation in pursuit of their calling and purpose. As a congregation we recognize there may be needs beyond the resources of an individual or small group. We will intentionally seek specific ways to focus/direct corporate resources to affect the world by seeking consensus through listening to one another and God's spirit in our decisions.

As a congregation, we recognize God's call to do justice because God has anointed us as well, and sends us to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of God's favor.

The task of each new generation of Christians is to renew the faith, to own it for ourselves, and to find that place where the life of faith intersects the language of the current culture. The challenge to Christians in the 21st century is to rediscover the core identity of what it means to be followers of Jesus. We are living in a time of tremendous change in society and culture. The church reflects this change. Add to that, recent developments in biblical scholarship, archaeology and other sciences, and the widespread information that is so readily available on the internet. There is a lot of new thinking and new feeling going on! One church leader, Bishop John Shelby Spong, compared the current situation to the Protestant Reformation except, he said, the current reformation makes that one look like a children's tea party!

We are not living in a world that has forgotten Jesus, but we are living in a time in which the role of the Christian Church is changing significantly. Doctrines and perspectives that were just assumed for centuries are now being questioned not only from outside the church, but also from within it.

We are reminded in this Advent season that the need today for God's love - for peace, justice, and the good news of liberty for the oppressed—Jesus' own mission statement—is tremendous. The need is tremendous and the church is still called to live, represent, and interpret God's new creation in today's world to people with diverse backgrounds, faith traditions, beliefs, and non-beliefs.

The theme of journey is powerful for the life of faith. Churches can be places where people explore and seek an understanding of their faith in an atmosphere of trust and safety. That is part of the mission we share together at Crossroads Church. People need the shared journey that churches can offer—where people ask hard questions in love, share their developing understandings, and seek to integrate their actions and their beliefs. The very process of asking honest questions really matters. Asking them right out loud even in church is an energizing process. People care because the questions are honest and because the questions are theirs.

Jesus is still the way, the alternative way to the conventional wisdom of a consumer society. This way lies at the intersection of the church and the marketplace. It is as much there as here. This is what is compelling about church today. Jesus is not our possession to sell to the world. He is the way we know about God, the way we see God more clearly. He is the eternal God with a human face. Our calling is to let others see Jesus in our faces, In our shared life, in our actions toward each other, and in service to the community around us.

The more clearly we frame the deepest questions of our lives and invite people to ask their most meaningful questions, the more powerfully we all will be able to find living answers. This is the hope we have to offer the world. Despite what we may think about these questions, they need to be asked. They also need us to live into our answers as honestly as we possibly can in Jesus' name.

Jesus is present within us—present as the Holy Spirit guiding, teaching, and encouraging us. So much of what Jesus taught and lived directed his followers, including us today, to be invested in the well-being of those around us.

The mission of the Church today is to work in partnership with the Spirit of God in us and around us, for the transformation of the world into the *Shalom* of God. The mission of Crossroads Church is to be a community that encourages transformation of people in partnership with the Holy Spirit. This is a Spirit community that takes seriously what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." The journey of discipleship begins in scarcity and moves toward abundance. It begins in the wilderness and moves toward the Promised Land.

This journey moves through the land of loneliness and despair, transforming that land into a kingdom of love. As a congregation, that means our mission is to invite, encourage, challenge, and support people on that journey. Our mission is to share the vision of a world that is free to realize its potential and of a people who can fulfill theirs as well. Our mission is to see Jesus in the face of a sister, a brother, a friend, an enemy, even a pastor; and let them see Jesus in each of us. It is to let anyone who touches this community have at least the chance to feel the Spirit here and to excite the Spirit in them. I invite you to make that journey, in Jesus' name.