

Jesus begins His ministry in Galilee. This northern part of Israel borders on the Sea of Galilee. Jesus recruits fishermen from this sea to be His disciples; He walks on the water of this sea, He grants miraculous catches of fish from this same sea. Many of those Bible stories that you know come from this part of Israel. After His baptism, Jesus comes to Galilee to begin His work of preaching and healing: the ministry that the Father had sent and anointed Him to do.

Jesus begins this ministry by teaching in the synagogues of Galilee. Each Sabbath the Jews would gather in these synagogues for their worship services. They would come to hear the Word of God; they would come to pray and to praise their Lord. At the synagogue they would ask a teacher, a rabbi, to stand up and read from the Scriptures. Once this reading was complete, the rabbi would sit down to speak about the reading; to give what we would call a sermon. This is where Jesus begins His ministry: in the small synagogues of Galilee. He would enter these houses of worship and teach there, within their weekly services. Jesus becomes known throughout Galilee. Here, far removed from Jerusalem, with its great leaders and politics; far removed from the Pharisee's main city, Jesus begins His preaching and is received well.

But then, He comes to Nazareth. Here it is different. Here is the town in Galilee that Jesus called home. Here are those who knew Jesus as a boy. They had seen Him with Joseph and with Mary. They had watched Him learn to walk, learn to talk; they had seen Him grow in stature and wisdom. They had known Him as the boy next door, across town; He was familiar to them—in fact, too familiar to them.

As was His custom and pattern, in Nazareth Jesus goes to the synagogue. He works here too in the regular worship of the Jews. Here is a reminder to us: God gathers His people around His word. Let us not think lightly of these worship services! Let us, like Jesus, heed the third commandment: let us Keep the Sabbath day holy by gathering weekly in God's house around

His Word and gifts. Jesus did not think Himself above this; He regularly came to these services—may we do the same in our lives.

In Nazareth, Jesus is asked to stand up to read. He rises; He takes the scroll in His hands. He turns through it until He finds the passage. He reads from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." The reading over, Jesus sits down again. How ordinary! Jesus simply walks into the synagogue, stands up, reads, and sits down. No press conference; no lights; no great show. Jesus does not crash a state dinner to get attention. He does not sound a false alarm about a boy floating in a lawn chair with balloons. Instead, Jesus uses something FAR more powerful than the best publicity stunt.

Jesus makes Himself known through His Word. The ordinary synagogue service is about to become extraordinary, not through some exciting stunt, but through the still, small voice of the Lord: the voice that will shake the world, especially here in Nazareth. We only have a record of what Jesus began to say, but it is enough. Today, Jesus says, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today this prophecy is fulfilled—and your ears hear it! The eyes of the people in Nazareth are fixed on Jesus; their ears take in what Jesus says. They are witness with eye and ear of the Lord fulfilling the Scripture. In their midst is the Messiah; here is the Christ, anointed with the Spirit. Here is the one sent from God. He makes Himself known by His Word.

The sermon text lays out the work of the Messiah. Note—there is no talk here of overthrowing Rome; no vision of a new political state in Israel. Instead, the Isaiah text describes the Messiah proclaiming the Lord's grace and healing—the Messiah working not with a sword, but with His Word. He is anointed to PROCLAIM good news to the poor. He is sent to PROCLAIM liberty to the captives. He comes to give sight to the blind; He comes to set at

liberty those who are oppressed. His Word brings liberty; His Word is good news; He comes to heal those suffering, imprisoned, and oppressed by sin and all its ugliness.

Jesus will spend the next years doing these very things in Israel. The work begun in Galilee will continue until Jesus is crucified and killed. Up to the end, He proclaims liberty and good news—from the synagogue of Nazareth to the thief on the cross next to Him, Jesus fulfills the office God gave to Him. He proclaims God's Word to Israel.

Nazareth is less than impressed. Jesus' words stir them up. Isn't this Joseph's son, they ask? Who does He now think that He is? Maybe He can pass Himself off to others as great, but we know where He came from! He can't fool us—this is just the carpenter's boy. Well, sort of. Jesus, of course, is not Joseph's biological son. He is Joseph's son only because He lived in the house of Joseph, under His care and upbringing. The crowd does not know as much as they think that they do. They miss Jesus' true source and Father.

Jesus knows this will be. Why should we expect anything different? No prophet is acceptable in his hometown—not even Jesus. As Jesus reminds them, God sent Elijah and Elisha to Gentiles; their own people, Israel, wanted nothing to do with them. That is too much for the synagogue in Nazareth. They will not take this from the kid down the street, whose head is now swollen! They try to kill Jesus! Jesus' words were too much—this bombshell dropped among them angered them to the point of murder.

They drive Jesus to a cliff, intending to throw Him over and end it right there. They were a few years too early. A day would come when Israel would reject the Lord's anointed; a day would come when they would put Jesus to death. But there, in Nazareth, that day had not yet come. Jesus would not die at the bottom of a cliff in Nazareth; He came that He might go to Jerusalem, and die on a tree outside the city. That day would not come until Jesus had completed His work in Israel; here in Nazareth, Jesus was just getting started with that work. He would determine when the right time was; He would not be forced to submit to the hostile crowds in

Nazareth. When all was ready, Jesus would bow His head to suffering and death. On this day, He simply used His power to walk through them; they could not lay a hand on Him. The one who came to bring salvation, to proclaim God's favor, left them to complete His work in His time.

But, having completed the work of redemption on the cross, Jesus is still working as our Messiah. Still He comes to us; still He brings us the fruits of His work. Salvation was accomplished by His death and resurrection, it comes to us now through the proclamation of Christ's word. By this Word, Christ, the anointed one, still comes to us.

He comes to proclaim good news to the poor. He comes to the poor in spirit, to those who are humbled before God. He comes to those who boast not in their own righteousness, but confess their sins and plead for God's mercy and forgiveness. The humble and lowly are prepared by Christ to receive His good news of forgiveness. Come not today before Christ with your own pride or merit or works. Come not boasting of what you have done, or thinking of your great accomplishments. Before Christ, these amount to nothing. Come instead humbly and lowly; plead for His mercy as one poor in spirit—and hear the good news He proclaims to you: your sins are forgiven; His death covers all that you have done; His blood makes atonement for you.

Christ comes to proclaim liberty to the captives. He comes to those held captive and imprisoned by sin. Who is held captive to sin? Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin, Christ tells us. Sin's captivity comes in different forms. Some are held captive by the guilt of their sins. They feel the wrong of what they have done; they live in fear of getting their just punishment. They know sin's power to trap us in our own misdeeds and guilt. Others are captive to the accusing voice of their conscience—the unsettled feeling that all is not quite right with them. They may not connect this with sin, but they know its imprisonment just the same. Their stained conscience might lead them to seek rest in all the wrong places: in lashing out at

loved ones; in burying themselves in work; in losing themselves in fantasy realms or virtual worlds. If they pursue these things—and not Christ—to find rest for their souls, they will never find peace. Others are even less informed of sin, but feel its imprisonment still. They feel incomplete, unsatisfied; they may accomplish great things, but still feel worthless—unfulfilled.

The only release from this captivity is found in Christ. He grant liberty—freedom from sin’s power to trap us in. He comes still to grant His forgiveness. He comes to give us true rest. Where Christ grants forgiveness, sin is removed. Where Christ forgives, guilt is removed; the accusing voice of our conscience may be stilled by pointing it to Christ and His Word of forgiveness. The Christian may ask himself: Why should that trouble me? Christ’s blood has washed it away. In Christ we find liberty; in Him we find true rest.

Christ comes still to set at liberty those who are oppressed. He sees us under the burdens of sin. He sees us weighed down by all the baggage that sin brings—by anger and sorrow; by strained relationships, by failures of our own and others; by disappointment and heartache. He lived as our brother—He knows the oppression we face in a world corrupted by sin. And He comes to free us from this oppression. He comes to give us life—HIS life. He comes to lift up our eyes from our burdens; to direct us to His sure promise of life that is ours now, in Him. This life has no end. This life endures eternally. This life flows from Christ and leads us to Him. This life is a life of liberty—a life that cannot be taken away by sin and the worst it throws at us.

Take heart! Your Messiah comes to you. God anointed Him to come to you and save you. He gives you liberty. He provides the rest that is found in God alone. When you are suffering and weighed down; when you are oppressed and frustrated, lift up your eyes to Jesus. Behold Him as your Messiah. Think anew of His forgiveness, His life, His good news, His liberty that are yours. Live in the peace that flows from these gifts. Amen.