"When Good News is Dangerous*

Text: Luke 4:16-21

"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."

Thank you, Pastor Rebecca, and thank you, church, for welcoming this Lutheran to your church and your table here at Vista La Mesa Church.
I feel at home here because you and I belong to churches that believe the Table is bigger than our divisions. You say, "We are a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world." I pastor a church that meets at a wall, embodying that fragmentation.
Every Sunday at 1:30 pm , we celebrate communion at the US-Mexico border on Monument Mesa at Friendship Park, where the border wall meets the Pacific Ocean.

We call it Border Church. La Iglesia Fronteriza. On the US side, behind the wall, a group of us gather. On the Mexico side, in Playas de Tijuana, another group gathers. And we celebrate communion together but separated by the wall or walls. Eight years ago we could pass the bread through the mesh. We could hold up the cup where the other side can see it. We could sing — often badly — in Spanish and English at the same time. That together as a church is no longer possible for us as a binational congregation.

It is still a holy and sacred time for us. And it is heartbreaking every week. Because the people on the other side are often families who have been separated by deportation. A mother in San Diego seeing her child in Tijuana. A husband who cannot come home. Families often come out to the park on the weekends in hopes of seeing and exchanging gifts with loved ones on the other side.

This is text from the gospel of Luke 4, is lived out.

In our Gospel today, Jesus goes home to Nazareth. It is his first sermon. He stands up in the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was his custom. Someone hands him the scroll of Isaiah, and he finds the place that speaks to him. He reads our text.

This was Jesus' mission statement. His inaugural address.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" — the Jubilee year, when debts are forgiven and land is returned.

And then Luke says, Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back, sat down, and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

At first, everyone loved it. Luke says all spoke well of him.

Until they realized what it meant.

Because what happens next is often left out. Jesus continues preaching and says God's favor is not just for Israel. He reminds them that in Elijah's time, God sent the prophet to a Gentile widow in Zarephath. And in Elisha's time, God healed Naaman the Syrian — an enemy. In other words, God's liberation is for outsiders.

And Luke says, when they heard this, the congregation was filled with rage. They drove Jesus out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff.

His first sermon almost got him killed. Because good news to the poor is always bad news to those who profit from poverty. Release to the captives is offensive to those whose power depends on cages.

That is exactly what I have learned at the wall.

When we say at the border, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us to proclaim release to the captives," we are talking about real captives. We have a detention center 15 minutes away — Otay Mesa Detention Center — where 1,500 of our neighbors are held for profit because they sought asylum. They are the captives Isaiah is talking about.

When we say "good news to the poor," we are talking about families on both sides of the wall who are poor because an imperial economy took their land and their labor.

When we say "to let the oppressed go free," we are talking about the dream of a Peace Park on Monument Mesa — a place where families can gather and celebrate milestones birthdays and holidays. I was just last weekend, a man came to Friendship Park to give a gift to his girlfriend on the other side. Of course, CBP would not allow him near the primary wall when he could pass the ring to his girlfriend. Every other week, family members come out in hopes of greeting their family on the other side. We talked with him for a few minutes, shared our frustration with the walls, and prayed with him. In August, someone brought a beautiful bouquet of roses to give to a loved one on the other side. They were warned, like all the others, not to approach the wall, so the flowers were left on the concrete K rail that is an extension of the border wall as it drops in the sand and surf.

These people that come have hopes and dreams, we have dreams — and I invite you to dream with us — of a Peace Park on Monument Mesa. A place where families can hug, where children can play together on both sides, where worship does not have to happen through a fence. It was once a state park where families picnicked together. It can be again. That is not idealistic or naive. It is dangerous good news of hope.

And that good news makes people angry. We have been told to stop. We have been surveilled by Border Patrol. We have been told communion through a wall is a security threat.

But Disciples, you know something about this. You have never believed that the Table belongs to us. You have always said all are welcome at the Table. At the border, we are just taking you literally.

When I hold up the bread on the San Diego side, and Pr. Guillermo holds up the bread on the Tijuana side, and we both say "The body of Christ, broken for you," — there is no wall that can stop that from being one Table. The walls are 30 feet tall, but the Table is bigger.

That is what Jesus meant when he said: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He didn't mean "Someday in heaven." He meant right now, in this place, with these people that we might rather not include.

So my question for us today, as Disciples of Christ, as followers of that dangerous first sermon, is this:

What would it mean for _this_ congregation to say, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing"?

Who are the captives in your zip code that God is calling you to release?
Who are the poor in this city who need to hear good news not as charity, but as Jubilee?
Who is the widow of Zarephath — the outsider — that God is already blessing while we are still arguing about whether she belongs?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon you. Not because you are perfect. But because you are baptized. Because you gather at a Table that has no borders.

And that is exactly what I see and hear about your ministry here at Vista La Mesa Christian Church.

For ? years you have been "Sharing Christ's Welcome" on Massachusetts Ave. — not just talking about wholeness, but practicing it. When you became an officially Open & Affirming congregation ?, you were preaching Luke 4. You were saying, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" — that good news is for _all_ people, that recovery of sight includes seeing the belovedness of our LGBTQ siblings who have been told they are outside God's favor. When you do your anti-racism work, your community outreach, your hybrid worship that says even if you can't get into the building you still belong at the Table — when you put a nursery and a children's sermon and wide aisles and quiet creativity bags into your sanctuary, you are enacting Jubilee. You are saying release to the captives, sight to the blind, and the Lord's favor is not just for the powerful, but for the child, the seeker, the doubter who wants to "come discover what YOU believe."

That's why your partnership with Border Church matters so much. You are not a church that just _goes_ to the border for a mission trip. You are a church that understands the border, because you live the border. You live at the intersection of faith and doubt, of white mainline tradition and many cultures, of Sunday at 10:30 and Zoom at the same time. And so when we gather at the wall that says "You do not belong," your ministry here answers back with your sign out front: "You matter to God. You matter to us."

From the border to this sanctuary: Do not be afraid to preach the sermon that gets you driven out of town. That is how you know you are preaching Jesus.

And if you ever want to come and see where "Today this scripture is fulfilled" looks like — come to Monument Mesa on a Sunday at 1:30. We will save you a place at the Table. On both sides of the wall.

Amen.