

Advent Lutheran Church
God's Year to Act
January 19, 2025
Luke 4:14-30

Tomorrow is a big day, especially for those of us who live in the United States.

Tomorrow features a Presidential inauguration. Some are hopeful the new leader will bring about a new era of prosperity. Others are fearful he will usher in a season of persecution.

Tomorrow is also Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Some will observe it in the way they do most holidays, by enjoying a day off of work. Others will experience it as a day on rather than a day off, responding to King's call to serve with a day of service.

Looking ahead, tomorrow offers promise and possibility and tomorrow generates pessimism and pain. There is much we wish to know about tomorrow that we simply cannot know and will not know until it is here.

This morning's Gospel lesson is one that shocked the original audience and one that should unsettle us. Picture folks going to "church" for a regular worship service, but with a new guy preaching – a first timer. That was their expectation, but Jesus had other plans.

Reading from the assigned text, the lectionary of his day if you will, Jesus begins with words from Isaiah. One contemporary translation of the Bible renders that part of the passage as

God's Spirit is on me; he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, To set the burdened and battered free, to announce, "This is God's year to act!"¹

¹ Luke 4:18-19, The Message

These words were likely enough to cause many in the congregation to squirm in the pews – even knowing these were words from a prophet and words found in Scripture.

Then I imagine Jesus taking an unusually long time to roll up the scroll, hand it to the assistant, and sit down to begin teaching. And, he doesn't start with a relatable small-town story, instead our modern translation says:

Every eye in the place was on him, intent. Then he started in, "You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place."²

This mic drop moment was likely met with prolonged silence as people tried to make sense of what Jesus had said.

Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, just told his next-door neighbors – the ones who had helped raise him – that he was not present to preach platitudes; he was embodying the realm God had always desired. He was proclaiming the arrival of the good news. More incredibly he claimed that he was good news.

As much as I try to imagine being in the congregation for this sermon, I cannot fully get there. My mind struggles to grasp what it would have been like. Those of you who have lived in small towns understand that everyone knew Jesus. For them, he was an ordinary man from an ordinary family who did ordinary things.

As this story progresses the crowd does what crowds throughout history have done with people who make them uncomfortable. They sought to silence him. To revoke his pulpit privileges. To send him away. To do whatever was needed to ensure he would never be heard from again.

The promise that this is God's year to act is what brings me here this morning. It's the promise I'm called to proclaim.

² Luke 4:20b-21, The Message

Like those in Jesus' audience that morning two thousand years ago there are many present today who came to church expecting the status quo. Unfortunately, I'm not able to deliver.

Siblings in Christ, I am here to embrace and amplify the message: this is God's year to act. Now. Starting today. Working in and through us individually and as a congregation.

What might this look like? It begins as good news for the poor.

It just so happens that I work with this group and have for a number of years. Most of you know my full-time job is leading the White Rock Center of Hope – an ecumenical ministry focused on those who are struggling economically.

The vast majority of those seeking help with food, clothing, or shelter do not feel that they are living in a time or place when there is hope or good news for the poor. Most feel discouraged. Many are working harder than ever in more jobs only to find that there is consistently more month than money.

Within this reality, lots of people are hungry. Folks line up hours in advance of our Saturday food distribution so that they can feed their families. Not a few, not even a few dozen. Hundreds of families comprised of more than a thousand of people wait patiently for the opportunity to receive food.

This is not limited to Dallas. People who are economically poor and struggling to be able to afford life's most basic items are lining up here at Advent. And this is not happening once in a while; it happens every single week. Ask anyone who volunteers at the Lord's Pantry. They know how hard it is for many to get by and how grateful these neighbors are that we care enough to bring good news to them one bag of groceries at a time.

When I think about modern day good news for the poor, especially on Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend, I think of the Poor People's Campaign.

Nearly everyone knows that Martin Luther King Jr. was a civil rights pioneer who used non-violent means to advocate for equal rights for Black Americans. Many people know he was The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. an ordained Baptist minister who understood this work as ministry.

When he announced The Poor People's Campaign in 1967 King envisioned thousands of poor people descending on Washington, D.C. to demand better treatment and more equal opportunity.

Sadly, King would be silenced before he could bring this to pass. His own death, however, was not the end. Remarkably the movement continued.

On Mother's Day in 1968 thousands of women gathered on the Mall in Washington, DC. For the next six weeks the protestors lived in what they called Resurrection City, an encampment of temporary structures. Day after day they journeyed to a number of federal agencies in order to demand economic justice.³

More recently another pastor has taken up this work. The Rev. Dr. William Barber II set in motion a modern-day Poor People's Campaign starting during the 2016 Presidential campaign. Today, the campaign continues to speak up for the economically poor – a growing group that now numbers 140 million people in the United States.⁴

Jesus came to bring good news to the economically poor. Jesus continues to be good news for poor and low-income people today. And, in a time when the wealth of the world's richest man is often headline news, we need to be reminded that good news for the poorest of the poor will be bad news for the richest of the rich.

Importantly while the passage begins with those who are economically poor, it doesn't end there. Jesus continued his

³ The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute. "Poor People's Campaign." Available from <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/poor-peoples-campaign>

⁴ Poor People's Campaign. "Our Demands." Available from <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/our-demands/>

message so that we would understand that he is always on the side of the marginalized.

Jesus names two specific groups for whom he is good news: those in prison and those living with physical disabilities. Then he concludes by mentioning the oppressed – the broadest category possible of those who live marginalized lives. This includes those oppressed by other people and by empire itself.

Siblings in Christ, right now there is talk about collapsing the already small American safety net, removing legal protections for LGBTQ people, and deporting large groups of immigrants. Put differently, there are those who are working to bring bad news to the very ones Jesus names as recipients of good news.

I had originally titled today's sermon "Preaching Good News" because that summarizes what Jesus did on the occasion of his first sermon and it suggests the ongoing work we are to participate in. This remains true, but it is not quite bold enough.

I invite you to be mindful of the writings of Isaiah, encouraged by visionary leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and William Barber II, and committed to living the way of Jesus.

2025 is God's year to act.

God is already bringing good news. Let us join in, starting today.

Amen.