

Luke 4:14-21
Embry Hills UMC
January 24, 2010

Please take this story and put it in your “truth is stranger than fiction” file.

I was going the other night to check out a new restaurant in an area of town with which I’m not all that familiar, so I did what any self-respecting diner would do. I headed to mapquest.

Now, I do have to tell you, since you’re going to want to try to re-create the mistake that I made, that my visit to mapquest took place through the website of one of those restaurant-review sites. I can’t remember if it was ajc.com or urbanspoon or yelp or kudzu or gayot. I tried once to re-create my error and couldn’t when I visited mapquest directly.

But, anyway, I clicked on the “directions” link, which automatically entered the location of the restaurant. And, then I began to type in the info about my house. And, I only got as far as the number of my street address, 964, when I inadvertently hit a button that immediately provided me with directions to this place.

Well, apparently, 964 is some kind of postal code from Jinfong Township in Taitung County, Taiwan. And, my trip to the restaurant included 152 different instructions, covering 12,000 miles and taking 39 days and 6 hours by car.

It’s gets better from here.

So, I began to read just how I would make it from Jinfong Township to metropolitan Atlanta, and I was bumfuzzled to notice that much of the instruction was in a language that I cannot read. But, I waded through the instructions until I found some of them in English.

Now, are you ready for this? Instruction 29 was “Turn left.” Instruction 30? “Swim across the Pacific Ocean.” Now, that leg of the journey took me from Japan to Hawaii. As you know, there’s a ways yet to go. So, I made my way across the Hawaiian Islands to Instruction 65. “Take the second left.” And, then, Instruction 66. “Jet ski across the Pacific Ocean,” which according to the map they provided, got me onto the American mainland in the state of Washington. And, from there to Atlanta, it’s easy-peasy.

I haven’t had a laugh that good in a while.

It’s nice to have some directions. But, if you’re trying to make it from Jinfong Township to Atlanta, those directions are pretty challenging.

Today’s Gospel reading contains some directions for us. They’re easy to understand, easy to follow, easy to remember. They’re just not always easy to do. The instructions come from a sermon Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue. And, while we don’t know everything that Jesus said in that sermon, we do know this. Among all of the passages of Scripture he could have read, he chose a text from the prophet Isaiah. There goes Jesus again, loving the words of those prophet voices. There he goes again, picking the passages that are most discomfiting. But, that’s what he did. And,

unlike the 152 different instructions on my mapquest journey from Taiwan to Atlanta, these instructions are laid out in five clear and distilled steps.

They represent Jesus' inaugural address. He's fresh from the waters of his own baptism. He's fresh from the wilderness, in which he's been hammering out his mission and preparing himself for both the joy and the resistance he knows he will face. And, now his ministry is launched. His strategic focus is planned. His future course is charted.

And, as one person has said, when he preaches that day, he's singing the song of his ministry in the key of his Mother Mary. Because, you remember what Luke said she sang when she found out he was to be born. She sang of the God who disturbs things. She sang of the God who subverts things. She sang of the God who rearranges things. Casting down the mighty and lifting up the lowly and emptying the full and filling the empty. And, now Jesus preaches, in the key of his Mother, in ancient key of those prophet voices, demanding justice and equity. And now, Jesus preaches, asking that the margins be graced to the center and the center be stretched to the margins until there is neither center nor margin, until there is no out and therefore no in.

And, his inaugural address is our little instruction book. Take good news to the poor. Work for the release of those who are captives. Help those who are blind to see. Set those who are oppressed free. And, boldly announce in word and deed that the day of God's favor for everyone has come.

These are dangerous words. No wonder the Church sometimes strays from them. It's not always popular to be involved in resisting oppression and in bringing God's graceful vision to bear upon the likes of us who are often so blind. It's not always popular to remind the rich of their obligation to the poor and to labor to free those who are in bondage to any system or institution that traffics in injustice. Just ask Jesus about that. Our Gospel reading for next week continues this story and shows us the rage that Luke says the people felt after their hometown boy preached in their synagogue, such rage that their response to his sermon was to want to kill him. It is not popular to be about the mission of Jesus.

But, these are the words that provide the basis for Jesus' ministry and for anyone who wishes to follow him. This is not just some sermon he preached to fill up the quiet time in the synagogue that day. This is his mandate. These words represent his purpose. They are the plumb line to which the ministry of the Church is to be aligned and against which the ministry of the Church is to be judged.

Is the Spirit of the Lord upon us, like Jesus said it was upon him that day? If so, then we have the same fire burning our bones that drove Isaiah and drove Jesus.

Where do you see poverty? Do something about it. Where do you see captivity? Do something about it. Where do you see people walking in blindness? Reflect the Lifelight of God's welcome and acceptance. Where do you see the oppression of people based on anything? Do something about it. Where do you see people living on the margins? Bring them in. Where do you see people who are cast down? Lift them up. Where do you see people living at the comfortable center? Stretch them out.

It's nothing more and nothing less than what we all promised when we signed on. Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves? Frankly, it's harder than swimming across the Pacific Ocean. But, it's Jesus' call to us.

And when we do that, when we do any of what Jesus preached about that day, then Jesus can say what he said when the sermon was over. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled.”