Emancipation Proclamation

Luke 4:14-30

A sermon delivered by Reverend Thomas K. Frizzell, Jr, the Chapel Pastor of the United States Naval Academy, on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 31, 2016.

Three years into a bloody civil war, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation – September 22, 1862. Pouring over the contents, President Lincoln had found an error, so the document had to be rewritten. After a long morning of receiving guests, President Lincoln’s hands were sore and stiff, making it a challenge to sign the corrected document. Finally, with great intentionality, he signed his full name, Abraham Lincoln, whereas on most documents he signed A. Lincoln.

In the New Year, on January 1, 1863, the proclamation declared "that all persons held as slaves" within the rebellious states "are, and henceforward shall be free." Five pages of lofty prose only applied to rebellious states, leaving the loyal border-states and those portions of rebellious states already controlled by Union Forces, free to retain slavery. Although the Emancipation Proclamation did not end slavery, it galvanized many, adding a moral imperative to the Union’s cause – a war for freedom, strengthening the Union politically and militarily. After January first, each union advance increased freedom and those liberated were invited to join the Army or Navy to become liberators. However, it was not until the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment on December 6, 1865, that slavery would be abolished.

Even in 2016, we continue to usher in an era when assumptions will not be tolerated, based upon the color of one’s skin. We know that “Black Lives Matter”, because all lives matter to God. We learned in Sunday School:

Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight, Jesus loves the little children of the world.

Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation continues to be a work in progress.
Having battled temptation in the desert, Jesus was filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus began to teach continuously \textit{(didasko, imperfect tense)} in the synagogues throughout Galilee, to much acclaim. Teaching is an emphasis in Luke-Acts, with Jesus teaching far more (13 times) in Luke than preaching/proclaiming \textit{(kerysso, 4:18, 19, 44; 8:1)}. In Acts, the disciples teach on 14 occasions. How might this inform our expectations of this art we call the sermon? Should we primarily teach or preach in order to galvanize the faithful and equip them for service?

Jesus’ reputation preceded him to his hometown of Nazareth. As was his habit, Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Some may remember that I did some teaching on “habit” a few Sundays back. It was Jesus’ habit to go to synagogue. In the synagogue, it was his habit to read. (We welcome new readers in our worship services). It was Jesus’ habit to teach. In the words of Stephen Covey:

\textit{Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny. (The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People)}

Standing to read from the scroll of Isaiah (quotation from the Septuagint, Isaiah 61:1-2a, seasoned with a portion of Isaiah 58:6d) Jesus proclaimed:

\textit{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.} (Luke 4:18-19).

Rolling up the scroll and handing it to the attendant, Jesus sits down. With every eye fixed upon him, Jesus says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21).

For Luke, this episode sets the tone for Jesus’ public ministry. Luke places this scene early in his Gospel - a Mission Statement concerning Jesus’ work and ministry. The Isaiah quote comes from portions of chapters 58 and 61 in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament. There we see this pattern of sending \textit{(apostello)} and proclaiming \textit{(kerysso)}.  

In Luke 9:1-2:

*Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.*

In Luke 10, the Seventy were sent out in pairs – with a battle buddy, with a wingman. Just prior to his ascension, Jesus instructs the disciples “that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:7) Luke-Acts recounts the disciples being sent to proclaim. Church, as God’s people, we gather and hear, equipping ourselves to be sent to proclaim. For many of us, gathering and hearing is our forte; however, being sent and proclaiming in word and deed is our growing edge.

Twice in the quote from Isaiah, Jesus proclaims release/freedom (aphesis). Three other times in Luke, the Greek is translated “forgiveness” (1:77; 3:3; 24:7), suggesting that forgiveness and release/freedom are intimately connected. The church is in the business of forgiving sins, but we also must assist those for whom we offer forgiveness with release from what binds them. The church must assist those held captive. This includes those in prison but is broadened to those suffering from addiction, those held captive in the grip of poverty, those oppressed in abusive relationships.

Edward Markquart, in the course *Witnesses for Christ*, says:

*You don’t throw a drowning person a sandwich. However good the sandwich may be, it doesn’t meet that person’s need. You throw a drowning person a life jacket or a lifeline, or you dive in for the rescue.*

For a drug addict, we offer forgiveness of sin, but we also assist them in release from their addiction through rehab. For the prisoner, we offer forgiveness, but we also train them to be contributing members of society to curb recidivism. For the poor, we offer them forgiveness of sin, but we also provide a fish and teach them to fish. For those in abusive relationships, we offer forgiveness of sins, but we also get the abused to a shelter and work to bring about wholeness and healing. In this way, we participate in Christ’s mission. We continue to fulfill Christ’s Emancipation Proclamation.
Jesus’ fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy ushered in a new era; however, Christ’s lofty prose from the Prophet Isaiah did not provide immediate release to those held captive by poverty. Prison bars did not immediately fall away. Sight was not restored to all who were blind. Without doubt, Jesus’ mission impacted many. His words galvanized his followers, adding a moral imperative to the Church’s cause. Each advance of Christendom increases freedom (release) and an invitation is extended to those liberated to become liberators. But there is much work to be done.

May we be taught in our gathering and hearing to truly go in peace to love and serve the Lord, sent to proclaim, offering forgiveness and freedom from whatever holds God’s people captive. Amen.