

Surprise!
Luke 4:14-21
NUCC Traditional
27 January 2019

*PRAY

A man wrote in to Reader's Digest with an embarrassing story about his former boss. This gentleman was just stepping out of the shower one evening when his spouse called and asked him to run down to the basement and turn off the iron she had accidentally left on. Without bothering to grab a towel or robe, the man headed down to the basement. Just as he reached the bottom stair, the lights came on and a dozen friends and colleagues jumped out and shouted, "Surprise!" His wife had planned a secret party for the man's 40th birthday.

It reminds me of the surprise party that I had thrown for me on **my** 40th birthday last fall by two dear friends. I thought that I was going to dinner with a couple, but instead there were 40 people in the banquet room of one of my favorite restaurants downtown.

Not all surprises are good ones, at least at first glance. Jesus had an uncanny ability to take people by surprise - and they weren't always pleased about it. Take, for instance, the surprise Jesus sprang on the Nazarene congregation in our Bible passage for today.

The ministry of Jesus was on a roll. After his baptism and time in the wilderness, he went forth to proclaim God's gospel of love. Following his preaching in Galilee, he entered his hometown. Although born in Bethlehem, his parents had fled to Egypt to protect their son from the wrath of King Herod. When Joseph heard of Herod's death, he brought his family back to Nazareth to live.

As a young boy, Jesus attended the synagogue with his father, where they participated in community worship regularly. Attentively listening to the scriptures which were read from the Book of the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets, he grew in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. Now the son of Joseph had returned, knowing that what he would say would not be received well.

That Sabbath day, he went to the synagogue, as any observant Jew would. The synagogues of Jesus' day didn't usually have paid or appointed preachers and teachers. Any adult male might be called upon to preach or teach on any particular Sabbath. Can you imagine if we ran our churches that way? If any adult could be called upon at any time to preach or teach on the Scriptures each Sunday? That's a huge responsibility. It might change our attendance patterns!

Jesus was handed a scroll from the book of Isaiah and asked to preach on it. He didn't have to flip around for a while to find what he wanted. He went straight to Isaiah 61, a Messianic passage of great importance to the Hebrew people, and read these words: "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."

And then, when Jesus was sure he had everyone's attention, he closed the scroll, sat down, and announced very simply, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Surprise! Say that again? The prophet Isaiah had been inspired to write those words more than 700 years earlier. First, who was Isaiah? He lived 700 years before Christ and was a prophet during the reign of King Hezekiah. He spent most of his life in

the city of Jerusalem. And the ministry of Isaiah was to proclaim the awful and fearsome judgment that would be brought upon Israel or any nation that defied God. But there was more. His message was to add salt to the wound, because God was going to use the wicked kingdoms of Assyria and Babylon to destroy his people and take them into captivity and slavery.

And do you know what Isaiah called that day? "The Day of The Lord." So next time you hear that phrase remember that it's not a good thing. The day of the Lord is to be feared.

For seven centuries, preachers and teachers had preached on a soon-coming Messiah who would turn the world's systems upside-down. This Messiah would lift the hurting, the oppressed, and the blind. The Hebrew people knew only too well what it was to suffer, to be held captive. They had waited hundreds of years for the fulfillment of this prophecy, and were prepared to wait hundreds more if necessary. And now a poor, no-name carpenter claims to be that Messiah who would "proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

How would you react if you were in their shoes? Is it any wonder that later on in the chapter the men of the synagogue try to kill Jesus? Of course, he got away, but we can't blame the Nazarene congregation for their reaction.

A story is told of a Polish prisoner of war during World War II. There is no record of what happened to him in the prison camp, but his experiences must have been brutal, because, in his later years, he seemed bent on reliving his prison experience. He even turned his small apartment into a prison cell. He put bars over the windows and constructed a small cage in which he slept. He refused to allow electricity or running

water in his apartment. He seemed determined to live in the most primitive and confining conditions. The former POW died in 1993 from the effects of his living conditions.

While this story is tragic, it makes me wonder about who among us may have been living for years in prison cells of our own making. We are bound by addictions, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, fear, guilt, or perhaps misconceptions about God.

Christian author Oswald Chambers writes, "The Spirit of God is always the spirit of liberty; the spirit that is not of God is the spirit of bondage, the spirit of oppression and depression . . . God who made the birds never made birdcages; it is [humans] who make birdcages, and after a while we become cramped and can do nothing but chirp and stand on one leg. When we get out into God's great free life, we discover that is the way God meant us to live--'the glorious liberty of the children of God.'"

"The Spirit of God is always a spirit of liberty." That's what God is all about. God is about hope; God is about justice; God is about freedom. Perhaps it was a surprise to Jesus' listeners 2000 years ago, and perhaps it is a surprise to us today. Jesus came to share the good news that God cares about hopelessness and oppression, and the systems in our society that create them.