



# Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

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**3<sup>RD</sup> EPIPHANY LUKE 4:14-30 & ISAIAH 61:1-3**  
**JANUARY 23, 2022**  
**"ON THE COUNT OF THREE"**

600 years before the birth of Jesus, the nation of Israel was invaded and spent 60 years in exile - a catastrophe due to the contradiction of their being a people of faith but not attentive to that faith. When they went into exile a lot changed, including the way they worshipped. Gone was a central location - the Jerusalem temple. During the exile most Jews lost the language of their ancestors - Hebrew, and their sacred writings. In exile they had to learn, and try to learn from, the stories of their faith gathering in small communities called synagogues, by men who were called "rabbi". Exile forced them to adapt.

If we use the analogy of music, they had to add a new counter melody to the old melody of being a chosen people. They had to learn to harmonize their ancient and immediate past with their present and their future. When children first learn music, "*Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*" is a good place to start. It's a simple scale. They have to learn those before harmonies are added to what they sing or play. The simple melody alone won't do. Music is by nature complex and challenging. It is the complexity and seeming contradictions of melody and harmony that create something that connects in our soul - music.

Lots of music is difficult and not liked, therefore. But some isn't simply because it's new. Long ago churches only chanted and using instruments to accompany voices was thought confusing. Later we got church musicians like Bach who some say beat a repeating theme to death while Mozart was full of flighty themes some said went nowhere. Come to think of it, that sounds an awful lot like what people say about preachers...but I digress! The history of Christianity is like the history of music. Each time a new tone or new harmony was sounded, each time something challenging added complexity to the old story, believers have cried out for the old songs.

In our gospel story today, Jesus composes a dramatically new interpretation of the old faith of Israel. The incident Luke relays in this story takes place in a synagogue where the boy Jesus was raised in the faith. But this is likely his first post-baptism, Spirit-infused visit in front of childhood friends, neighbors and his old teachers. A favorite song is selected - one the crowds loved...Isaiah. May well have been Elvis...or not! Anyway, when Jesus sings the messianic tune from Isaiah 61 folks ask for an encore, and he gives them not one but two - invoking Elisha and Elijah, prophetic heroes, oldies but oh so goodies.

But when Jesus highlights some of Israel's lowlights in these old songs, the singing stops. Of all the wondrous things accomplished by Elijah, why focus on his keeping some surly widow and her sickly son from Sidon fed and well? Of all the miracles worked by Elisha why highlight his curing a leprous general from Syria's army? Like Bach, Jesus offered a singular, simple melody he repeated over and again...God so loved *'the world.'* But like Mozart, Jesus also composed daring tunes that took listeners to new places spiritually - he played the simple melody of faith the only way you can - in complex arrangements.

Interpreters like Martin Luther insisted on one basic scale... grace alone, word alone, Christ alone. But he also insisted the church could not be "Latin alone" or scholarly alone. He saw that the family was elevated to the stature of priest and pope, that songs were written in low- middle German, that offerings alleviate the needs of the poor before the building projects of Rome.

His Southern Baptist namesake, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday we have observed this week, in faith plucked the strings of the older Martin's faith and dramatically amplified the imperative of faith to not just an internal disposition but an active dance against racism and poverty. Jesus quoted Isaiah whose audience was Jews being released from captivity in Babylon and the church has rightly interpreted Jesus as applying that of first importance to anyone who would be released from spiritual captivity through the forgiveness of sins.

But Isaiah 61 can support other, more complex arrangements, that call for us to be actively living out faith to lessen the effects and eliminate the causes of racism or homelessness - and to insist there is no such thing as "the black church" or the "Hispanic church" or the "native American church" or the "suburban or inner city church". There is only *"one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all."* In Isaiah 61, as Jesus read it, the term "poor, prisoner and oppressed" can and certainly does also mean the poor and the oppressed of this world physically.

There is also room in it to speak on behalf of unborn children - who some would call our world's most "oppressed" population. Our new ministry partners at Care Net, whom we introduced in November, would be the first to long for our nation's Supreme Court to reverse the constitutional protections *Roe v. Wade* gave abortion, but they would also be the first to also tell us that no matter what a court does, the pro-life Christian community must all the more serve women who may still choose abortion because they feel they have no other choice. And *"to comfort all who mourn and bind up the brokenhearted who've had abortions"* instead of leaving them in despair. Such interpretive work as this is not easy, but such we must commit ourselves to.

In his hometown synagogue, before friends, neighbors, and relatives he grew up with, Jesus had the ultimate opportunity *"preach to the choir"* and sing the same old song. Instead, he rehearsed them in a song of God's choosing, of God's composition- not theirs. Jesus re-wrote the music of forgiveness, acceptance, repentance and rebirth. He did this because God knows, and we should too, that the world and its people are more alike in heaven's eyes than different. To a broken and sinful world, we are called to preach release, recovery and freedom, and to thus make this and any year, for anyone, *"a year of the Lord's favor."* We can do that! We have God's word!

The Apostle Paul loved to use the human body as a metaphor of the church. He said the hand does this, the eye does that, and the foot does another. But all ultimately are connected to the same body. The 21<sup>st</sup> century question to the 21<sup>st</sup> century church might be - where will our feet take us - how much will our hands allow us to carry? How big are our hearts? How many different gifts and graces does this one, holy, apostolic body have? Or to put it another way, can this choir sing an old song with new verses and conviction? It would be a hit if we did. AMEN.