“It is Right to See This Day as a Special Time, a Holy Time”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday, January 31, 2016
Scripture Readings: Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 4:21-30
(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

They are words often heard, and regularly quoted.
“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 favour.”

They come from Isaiah, and so they are strong words of affirmation. You heard them from this lectern last week. They are from the opening of the first sermon of Jesus, and so they are important words.

Rarely do we focus on the fact that Jesus has done his own editing and abrupt changing of the ending of that passage – leaving out such ideas as vengeance, mourning, loss.

But Jesus is known for that. He never found a biblical passage that he could not edit in order to make sure the essence of the meaning of that passage was perfectly clear to those who heard it.

There are times when issues of punishment and revenge may have resonance, or at least seem to be consistent with life’s experiences. But Jesus hoped that was not the normal experience. In any experience of hardship, fear, poverty, judgment, we need to find a way to see this time as a time where God is present with acceptance and with encouragement.

Jesus skips the next line in Isaiah: "a day of vengeance of our God," and does not go on to talk about providing a garland for the ashes for those who mourn.

That is not to suggest that there is no place for religious truth in the midst of sadness or mourning, but Jesus did not want us to see that God's role is primarily a God of vengeance or dealing with disappointment.

The main goal is to see opportunity as part of the religious experience.

Jesus lived in a day where people were tentative about the role of religion, and what was expected of them. There were even some people who thought that religion was only about judgement and anger. In fact, to this day I still hear people list as the number one reason for not coming to church is they do not like getting yelled at.

But one only needs to give Jesus' teachings a cursory listen to know that such is not his style. He lifts up as the appropriate examples those who show a positive, hopeful, enthusiastic way ahead. The shock is they may not be the normal people of power and acceptance in society.

And so Jesus, in essence, provides us with a clear outline of how we should live if we are to live with meaning and purpose:

1.) Surround yourself with the right kind of people
    Jesus defines the right kind of people as those who are able to be open to possibility and potential. It is not people who have already made it, but people on a pathway of discernment and inner understanding.

I once served on a search committee for a congregation that had a dilemma – they had two candidates they were very much interested in, but from two very different perspectives.
One was well established, had a long career and excellent references; the second person also had been respected and came with excellent references, but with much less experience.

In the end, they called the second candidate, because, as one influential voice said: "We know candidate one will come and do a very good job, but candidate two has much potential, and many growing edges, so maybe if we chose that candidate, we will grow together in the faith."

John Drury, in his book ***Tradition and Design in Luke's Gospel***, points out that the word "today" is a very powerful, significant word in Luke's writings and storytelling. In his rendering, Luke tells us that we should read and hear the message of Jesus with an openness to "what does that say to me, today, in my life, and how can I be better?"

2.) Use your imagination; listen to your dreams
Jesus also is one who used his imagination, and encourages others to use their imagination. The teachings by parables stretch our thoughts and insights into a world different from what we may experience, yet one where truth becomes alive as we ponder these stories.

And our dreams? Many of us do not know that we dream, and for those of us who do dream, many times we are rehashing what the day before brought. Yet there can be windows of insight that put it all together for us, and help us to discern what needs to be done in our lives, today.

3.) Look after yourself

Finally, Jesus was one of the first proponents of healthy living. He was far from a best-selling author (he did not write anything as far as we know), but he did teach about care for the self, care for the soul, and came to deliver a message as simple and as direct in caring for others as he delivered in that first sermon based on Isaiah.

Judgment is for God; nurture of self is a joint venture between you and God, and God cannot partner with you if you are not willing to be part of the process.

We have many voices around us – from a variety of religious traditions, including our own Christian tradition – ready to say to anyone who will listen: "Prepare for the day of the vengeance of the Lord – it is coming; indeed, it is almost here."

Rather than listen to such voices, I am willing to listen to Jesus, who, in the midst of the possibility of talking about vengeance, chose instead to speak about this day as being part of "the year of the Lord's favour."

It is right to see this day as a special time, a holy time, a time of great opportunity. Why? I cannot put it more simply: "Because the Bible, quoting Jesus, told me so."