

“REMEMBERING ABRAHAM, MARTIN AND JOHN”

Date: January 14, 2007

Text: Luke 4: 14-30

Here is a question to get us started: how would you summarize Jesus' ministry? The passage just read was Luke's attempt to answer that question. I have several times in talking about Jesus' story noted that Matthew, Mark and Luke offer very similar accounts of our Lord's life. Mark was written first, around 65 A.D. Matthew and Luke borrowed heavily from his record. In the account of Jesus speaking in the synagogue, however, Luke tells the same story but changes the chronology. Whereas Mark's narrative comes in the middle of Jesus' ministry, Luke intentionally places it at the beginning to serve as a prologue.

Thus the writer was saying, “Here is my understanding of what Jesus was trying to do.” 3 attributes of his mission are listed. First, Jesus' ministry was empowered by the Spirit of the living God. As noted last week, Jesus' relationship with our Creator was unique. Through him, the power and love of the Almighty comes to be known in new ways. This power becomes part of our lives through baptism and on-going faith commitment.

Secondly, Jesus fulfills the salvation hope of the Old Testament. All of those passages read at Christmas that look ahead to that time when God would send someone to deliver his people have come to fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of this man from Nazareth. A Chinese woman once told a missionary: “I have been seeking this Person all my life and now you have told me his name.” When we think of our needs such as feeling good about ourselves, seeking to put aside guilt and anger from the past, trying to reach out to others, looking for direction in life – do not our thoughts and hearts come to rest upon that manger in Bethlehem?

Thus far, we would have no quarrel with Luke's assessment of our Lord's ministry, would we? The 3rd aspect, however, may cause us to stumble. Luke, not only in this passage but also throughout his Gospel, sees a definite social justice dimension to what Jesus was trying to accomplish. The Gospel, in a time when we hear so much about self-fulfillment, declares that we need to be concerned about the welfare of others and how they are being treated. Biblical echoes are heard when Martin Luther King said, “there can be no inner satisfaction while someone else is suffering from injustice.”

Would you agree that the tone of what Jesus read from the Book of Isaiah in the temple and his attitude throughout his life envisions a society where people of all races and ethnic backgrounds are included and those on the outside such as the poor, handicapped and imprisoned are welcomed? His feelings very definitely were predicated upon the strong theme in the Old Testament expressing concern for the poor and oppressed. Now take this idea one step further and I warn you it is a big step. **God sent Jesus not only to restore the relationship between individuals and their Creator but also to create a different kind of world!** That's what the kingdom of God is all about. And if God's concern for a better world is a Biblical theme, doesn't it make sense that God's people would need to have something to say in the political arena where decisions about culture and society are shaped? I don't think the old cliché “religion and politics don't mix” is really Biblical.

Separation between church and state is fundamental to our heritage and I know there have been abuses on both the left and right. Nevertheless, don't the voices of more moderate Christians need to be heard when it comes to issues such as war, poverty and so much else? Surely that can be done without imposing our views or not respecting others. Wasn't that what Martin Luther King was trying to do? In the debate in Washington over immigration Congressman Kuhl who represents part of Rochester and the Southern Tier told someone that he would be willing to support compassionate legislation if he heard from more people in his district encouraging that view. Isn't a shame that because of abuses on the part of some people true Christian values are removed from the political arena?

Jesus' “social contract” as set forth in the Gospel of Luke is inclusive in its vision. Do you, in any shape or form, share my concern that this vision of our Lord does not seem to be the direction in which our society is headed currently? In 1965 the average salary of a CEO was 29% higher

than the average worker and today it is 265 times greater! No better example than the chairman of Home Depot who was fired and received a bonus that was more than that given to everyone else in the company combined! I am troubled when a recent impartial report shows that the wealthiest 1% of our society got a 19% tax deduction while the rest of us got around 2%. Say what you will about the '60's, hippies, drugs, wantonness, there was a vision in those days of people living in harmony together and fairness for all people. Back then, some people at least would sing "We shall overcome" and blacks and whites were hand in hand, men and women, factory workers and executives. I don't find that kind of spirit prevailing today.

Nobody has all the answers and the problems our society faces are enormous but the American people historically have demonstrated a great capability to move forward if they share a common dream. But what is the dream to look like? It must go beyond plasma TVs and Hummers. I suggest that Christians need to hold high the vision of Luke 4, which calls for respect and justice for all people and treats all people as children of God. That's the dream Dr. King had. Luke 4 is so important at a time when the radio talk show mentality tends to be much more demeaning of people who are in the opposition camp regardless of the issue and appeals to the baser instincts in human nature. Sometimes on the way home from Batavia the only AM radio station that comes in clear is WHAM, where there is a talk show calls "The Savage nation." Michael Savage lives up to his name and says terrible things about many groups of people and yet has a huge listening audience.

I am suggesting that such bigotry and "dishing," to use a street idiom, has no place in God's world. As an example of the type of leadership I am looking for consider the late President Gerald Ford. From what I have read, he might not have been a great president but he did have the ability to work with a diverse group of people toward a common good and that is desperately needed at every level of our society. Along the same lines, can the new governor really get enough bipartisan support to deliver on his promises to clean up Albany? Let's hope so. Obviously the sermon talk-back provides a chance for you to respond to all that I am suggesting.

. One of the great aspects of our nation is that it has a rich heritage of seeking liberty and justice for all people, not perfectly but better than most. A Republican by the name of Abraham proclaimed that all citizens regardless of color should be free. A Democrat by the name of John tried to move us into "Camelot." A black man named Martin had a dream of little black children from Stone Mt., Georgia getting together with white children from the woods of Maine. There can be no doubt that Dr. King based his vision upon that of his Lord and lifted up that which would appeal to the very best in humanity

Certainly we would not all agree on the means to correct our society's ills but hopefully we long together for that day when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, when people will not be judged by the color of their skin or the amount of money in their wallets, when all children will have an opportunity to pursue their God-given talents.

We need to know that though the issues are complicated and our efforts always will be imperfect, nevertheless, Jesus has come to show us the way, not only as individuals but also as a church and a society. Surely we as his followers need to claim this higher ground.