

Isaiah 61:1–2a (NIV)

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor . . .

Luke 4:14–28 (NIV)

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

²² All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips. “Isn't this Joseph's son?” they asked.

²³ Jesus said to them, “Surely you will quote this proverb to me: ‘Physician, heal yourself!’ And you will tell me, ‘Do here in your hometown what we have heard that you did in Capernaum.’”

²⁴ “Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown. ²⁵ I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. ²⁶ Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. ²⁷ And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed—only Naaman the Syrian.”

²⁸ All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.

The true story

When does the story of Jesus' public ministry begin? His birth -- no. His baptism in the Jordan? Maybe, but probably not. How about when he began meeting those he would call to be his disciples? Now, we are getting really close. But for me, and I'm sure for Luke, it is when Jesus rose in his hometown synagogue and read from Isaiah about the anointed one. The day that Jesus and his fellow Jews had been awaiting for so long had now arrived -- in him, in Jesus. And nothing would or could ever be the same.

Today, Nazareth is a bustling city of 80,000 in Galilee, a couple of hours north of Jerusalem. It is about 70% Muslim and has a Muslim mayor, which probably surprises

you. Loudspeakers dot the city, shouting out the Muslim call to prayer five times a day. But in the city center also stands the majestic Church of the Annunciation. It is of recent design and construction, sitting atop the ruins of the ancient village of Nazareth. Underneath the soaring sanctuary is a cave-like structure remembered as the house Jesus grew up in. Sometimes when I've been there, Mass is being held directly in front of the cave/house. Across the grounds of the church, there are paintings, murals, and mosaics from around the world, all devoted to the adoration of the Christ-child and his mother.

Two millennia ago, Nazareth was a small village of no significance on a hillside about four miles southeast of Sepphoris, the largest city in the region. When Jesus had grown to adulthood, he chose Nazareth, his hometown, as the place to announce publicly his vocation, to light the fire that would consume him in just a few short years.

In AD 27 or so, it was a typical Saturday in Nazareth, but a Sabbath day different from all that came before and came after.

The sun is up early. It's warm. Since no work can be done on the Sabbath, many of the villagers sleep a bit later. It is the day set aside to rest, as God had rested after creating the cosmos. After morning prayers and a morning meal, the villagers make their way to the small synagogue where they will hear and then discuss passages from the Torah¹ and from the Prophets. One man will read from the Hebrew while another translates it into Aramaic, as most of the villagers neither read nor speak Hebrew.

On this particular day, a villager by the name of Jesus, the middle-aged son of Joseph and Mary, rises to read from the Prophets. He asks that the scroll of Isaiah be brought to him. Jesus unrolls it to the desired section and begins to read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . ." All eyes in the synagogue are on their neighbor as he reads. A stunned silence falls across the room as Jesus proclaims that God's great promises are being fulfilled on that quiet Saturday morning.

For a long time, the Jews had been awaiting just such an announcement. That the promises brought by the prophets of old were about to be fulfilled. That God was stepping in and finally putting things right. But this . . . the neighbor's kid? Today, in Galilee? . . . it just couldn't be . . . could it?

What follows starts well and ends badly. Though everyone in the synagogue that day was stunned by what they heard, some heard the shocking proclamation with grace and wonder. Could it be that God's prophet, even God's anointed, could come from Galilee, from Nazareth? But we can be sure that many others responded with derision. Wasn't this just the boy from down the block!?

In the end, wonder and derision both turned to anger as Jesus explained that his anointing would be not just for the Jews, but for the Gentiles also.² Not just for the Jewish poor, but for the world's poor. In Jesus, all the blind would see and all the captives would be freed, irrespective of race, gender, or nationality – or even their covenantal status with God. And his neighbors ran Jesus out of town for it.

This story is one of the most significant in the gospels. From that Sabbath day onward, everything Jesus said and did had to be understood in the light of his anointing by God

¹Torah, meaning "law" or "instruction" in Hebrew, was also used to designate the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, Genesis to Deuteronomy. These books, believed to have been written by Moses, were accorded a special status in the Scriptures.

²In the rest of the passage, (4:16-30), Jesus reminds them, for example, that Elijah and Elisha had both gone to the Gentiles. Also, Jesus' first miracles were in Capernaum, not Nazareth. Capernaum, the town on the Sea of Galilee that Jesus would make his ministry headquarters had a sizeable Gentile population. "Who was Jesus to go the Gentiles?," the villagers thought to themselves. God's anointed, the Christ/Messiah, belonged to the Jews! As Luke emphasizes throughout his gospel, Jesus was not only the Jewish Messiah, but the Savior of the world. It makes you wonder how often we try to put exclusionary claims on Jesus.

and the arrival of God's kingdom.³ He came to turn the world upside down and refused, therefore, to let people rest comfortably in their self-righteousness.

Jesus' countless healings, his welcoming of tax-collectors and prostitutes, and his forgiving of sins were all acts of caring compassion, but they were far more. Jesus made the blind see because in the kingdom of God there are no blind. Jesus ate with outcasts because in the kingdom of God there are no outcasts. He made the lame walk, because in the kingdom of God there are no lame. He forgave sins because with the arrival of God's kingdom, the prisoners had been set free.⁴ It was time to deliver on God's promises of Good News for the poor. . . . read again the passage from Isaiah. It was time for the arrival of heaven-on-earth, the kingdom of God.

Jesus would not abide any interpretation of the Law of Moses that interfered with the blooming of heaven-on-earth. How much sense could such an interpretation really make? Not heal on the Sabbath because a few deem it to be work. Absurd.

Jesus enacted heaven-on-earth in all that he said and did. And he called his disciples then and now to such enactments acts as well. In these acts of feeding and clothing and caregiving, we not only care for those who need caring, we pull God's future into the present. Every act of love we perform is an eschatological moment, giving a glimpse of the coming marriage of heaven and earth.

Nazareth in the First Century¹

In the first century AD, Nazareth occupied only the ridge and did not extend into the Jezreel Valley 350 meters below (Reed, *Archaeology*, 115–16). The village's 40,000 square meters could have accommodated a population as high as 2,000 (Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology*, 56), but current estimates allow a population of only 200–500 at the time of Jesus. All evidence supports the view that Nazareth's primary industry was agriculture, including the production of wine and olive oil. The slopes supported the growing of wheat and barley. The soil to the south permitted the cultivating of vegetables. The village, like many throughout the ancient Mediterranean, was likely self-sufficient, though poor. The lack of remains from the period suggests that houses were constructed of local uncut stones and mud with thatch roofing. The town receives no mention in non-Christian sources from the Roman Period. It likely was known only at the local level, and perhaps enjoyed little esteem even there (John 1:46).

Throughout much of the 20th century, it was believed that Galilee was to a great extent isolated until the time of Hadrian. Improved archaeology of the region, however, has revealed an extensive network of pre-Hadrian trade routes, of which Sepphoris was a hub (Strange, "First Century Galilee," 40). Nazareth lay only 5 kilometers south of Sepphoris, and though the ascent of the Nazareth ridge was significant, it was not insurmountable (Reed, *Archaeology*, 115). Nazareth would not have been far from major trade routes (Meyers and Strange, *Archaeology*, 27, 43). Since the 1920s, Nazareth's proximity to Sepphoris has inspired much discussion, especially concerning the possibility that Jesus spent much time in that city (see Reed, *Archaeology*, 103–14). Archaeology demonstrates that Sepphoris was built into an impressive city under Antipas early in Jesus' life (Reed, *Archaeology*, 117).

¹ Ian W.K. Koiter, "Nazareth," ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³The arrival of God's anointed (the Messiah), the liberation of the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, the defeat of sin and death, and the resurrection of the dead were all part of one single package: the Day of the Lord, the day when God would step in and put things right, keeping the promises God had made long before. It is the day that the prophets from centuries before had envisioned and the day for which the Jews had long waited. Jesus announced its arrival. God's new age was dawning; the kingdom of God had come.

⁴I couldn't help but be reminded this week of Martin Luther King's great "I Have a Dream" speech delivered at the 1963 March on Washington. This great preacher ended with these words from an African-American spiritual: "Free at last, free at last . . . thank God Almighty, we are free at last." The marriage of heaven and earth, aka heaven-on-earth.

To the cliffs!

In any event, it took a few minutes for Jesus' words to sink in and then, sadly, many reacted with great fury. Jesus had grown up among them. They had changed his soiled clothes when he was an infant. They had helped to school the boy and teach him a trade. God's anointed? Ridiculous! Blasphemous! As the confrontation worsened, Jesus' neighbors chased him to a nearby cliff, intent on throwing him over the side. But he escaped and headed for Capernaum, a larger village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee that would serve as Jesus' "headquarters" for his Galilean ministry.

There, Jesus taught in the synagogue and the crowds began to grow. He cast a demon out of a man, demonstrating Jesus' authority and power to the crowd (Luke 4:36-37). Then Luke gives us a brief but fascinating story.

After casting the demon out of them, Jesus headed over to the home of Simon (Peter) whose mother-in-law had been terribly ill. Jesus simply stood over the woman, told the fever to leave, and it did. Upon which she gets up and makes dinner for everyone. What?! The first thing to note is that, at this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has not called any of his disciples. Thus, perhaps the healing of Simon's mother-in-law is Jesus' way to prepare Simon for Jesus' call to discipleship.

Sadly, Simon's mother-in-law is not named, as was so often the case in the patriarchy of the ancient world. Nonetheless, "she serves as a pattern for all who would subsequently be delivered by Jesus' word and then express their gratitude through serving."⁵ There may be only a few sentences devoted to her story, but she is an example to us all.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus*.

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week: We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.

⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 111.