

**A Picture to Guide Us (Luke 4:14-21 NRSV)**  
**Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Mo**  
**Sunday, January 23, 2021**  
**WATCH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-picture-to-guide-us](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-picture-to-guide-us)**

During the pandemic's early months, which seems like a lifetime ago, the sale of jigsaw puzzles soared across our country. One puzzle manufacturer reported more sales on one day in March 2020 than in December in the previous year.<sup>1</sup> Very quickly, demand outpaced supply, and puzzles were hard to come by. I picture folks meeting in dark alleys selling puzzles out of the back of their cars with outrageous markups or suburban neighbors meeting at the fence line, bartering for puzzles and toilet paper.

How many of you worked a puzzle or two during the early months of work-from-home, quarantine pandemic? What about our online friends? Leave a comment – are you a pandemic puzzle participant?

If you've ever worked a jigsaw puzzle, you know some of the tricks. Tackle the edges first; sort out non-edge pieces by color on separate trays. But one of the most important helps to work a puzzle is the picture on the box. You refer to it often. One pandemic puzzle enthusiast said she picks a puzzle with a picture she doesn't mind staring at for a few hours.<sup>2</sup>

The picture on the box helps you see the bigger picture, know where the pieces fit, what the abstract colors and markings of this one tiny piece in your hand might be part of so you can make sense of it and place it correctly with the other pieces.

Without a picture, you might get lucky, but it will be a lot harder and take a lot longer. The more complex the puzzle, the more critical the picture. A 25-piece kids' jigsaw puzzle is one thing. A 2,000-piece puzzle of a field of grass is another.

To bring wholeness from all the brokenness, we need a guiding image.

I was lamenting/complaining the other day to someone about the challenge of living in a world of constant disruptions and chaos. Plans are constantly changing. It's not only plans but the constant change in guiding instructions. Masks but not those masks. Two shots, no, three shots. Ten days, no five days at home, but only if you're symptomatic. We're doing our best, learning more each month we walk through this pandemic, but the constant chaos is exhausting and disorienting. It makes me think of ballet dancers

Ballet dancers are known for constantly turning in a circle without getting dizzy or disoriented. I stand up too fast, and I'm likely to be down for the count. Dancers use a technique called "spotting." As a dancer turns, spotting is performed by rotating the body and head at different rates. While the body rotates smoothly at a relatively constant speed, the head periodically

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/13/833346707/with-people-stuck-at-home-jigsaw-puzzle-sales-soar>

<sup>2</sup> ibid

rotates much faster. It then stops to fix the dancer's gaze on a single location (the spotting point, or simply the spot). Dancers will sometimes focus on an actual visual spot if one is available – like a light or a seat in an auditorium. Maybe even another dancer in which the spot will move yet still be a consistent spot for them to focus on.

In our text today, Luke gives us our consistent orientation, our spot, to help us not become disoriented. Luke gives us a picture on the puzzle box of life where we can fix our gaze so we can see the beautiful picture we are making with all our individuals pieces.

Other Gospel accounts place this story of Jesus speaking in his hometown synagogue in chronological order. But by the time Jesus unrolls the scroll among those assembled that day, he's already performed miracles and healings in many places. He's called the twelve and amazed and confused people with his parables and his many questions and few answers. But Luke positions this event of Jesus reading the words from Isaiah to the beginning of his Gospel account, not because it is first in time, but rather, because its importance. Luke wants us to know that what happens with Christ in today's passage sets the stage for everything yet to come. You want to know why Jesus performs miracles and healings? This is why. You want to know why Jesus called the twelve disciples and what they were called to? This is why.

Luke is saying, “You are not going to understand how the pieces fit together unless you can see the big picture. So, I’m going to give you a picture – one you shouldn’t mind staring at for hours.”

The picture is Jesus, standing among a crowded gathering of believers and doubters and curious onlookers, crowded in wonder at this hometown wonder they’ve heard reports of from the surrounding villages. This is not just another Sabbath gathering at the synagogue. There is something electric in the air that comes when hope and hesitancy mix. You can almost smell it like when spring storm is born as warm, moist air collides with cold air above. Something is brewing, it smells like rain, perhaps even a storm.

Jesus stands to read and is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolls it, finds the words he is searching for, and begins to read to the charged gathering: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.”

Luke wants us to know Jesus’ work is accompanied and powered by the Spirit. The Spirit is a main character throughout Luke’s gospel, guiding and empowering people for ministry. Prior to today’s text in Luke’s Gospel, the Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism. The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness for testing, and now, filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus reads a passage from Isaiah that refers to the Spirit of God resting on him, the long-awaited Messiah, anointed to bring good news.

Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down to teach as was the custom. Luke says, “every eye in the place was fixed on him.” Have you ever wondered what that was like? Was it like the longest 60 seconds of their lives as he moved to his seat? Did Jesus move extra slow just to build the tension? Or did he move slow because he knew the next words he uttered would cost him. That today’s adoring crowds would be tomorrow’s loathing

crowds. Did the whispers and murmurs already start or did they begin after Jesus's next sentence, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The One bringing wholeness to all the brokenness has arrived. I am He. I am not simply speaking the Word, I am the WORD, in the flesh. I am the One to fix your gaze on. I am the picture to guide you. I am your spotting point. Believe in me, follow me, join me in bringing good news to the poor and exploited, the oppressed and depressed, the ones who cannot see and the ones who feel unseen. Like the Christ we follow, empowered by the same Spirit of God, we are invited to bring life to these words from Isaiah, to put skin in the game.

In the 1890s, Margaret Dunlop Gibson and Agnes Smith Lewis, twin sisters from Scotland, traveled to Egypt to study ancient manuscripts at St. Catherine's Monastery. Nestled at the foot of Mt. Sinai, this community is well known for the many treasures it holds from the early centuries of Christianity. One of the books they studied is known as a palimpsest, a manuscript that has been "nearly erased" so a new text can be written on it. It was a practice in a time when writing materials were scarce. The process for "erasing" the pages made from paper, parchment, animal skin or some other writing material usually involved washing or scraping it, which often left remnants of the original writing barely visible. Like a chalkboard in a classroom that wasn't meticulously erased or a dry erase board where marker residue faintly remains, yet someone writes new stuff on top of it.

The palimpsest Agnes and Margaret studied told the stories of women saints respected in early years of Christianity, some of the desert mothers who gave up comfort, security, and even their lives to follow Christ. These stories were written down around the late eighth century. When Agnes studied the palimpsest more closely, she discovered those stories were written on top of the four gospels, written down on those same materials nearly 400 years earlier. In fact, the gospel narratives underneath those written stories of the women turned out to be some of the oldest editions of the gospels ever discovered.

Writer and minister, Jan Richardson reflected on this discovery of the sisters saying, "The pages of the manuscript, with their layers of text, make visible what happened in the lives of these women of the early church. By their devotion, by their dedication to preserving and proclaiming the gospel message, the desert mothers became living palimpsests, the story of Christ shimmering through the sacred text of their own lives, the Word of God fulfilled in them."<sup>3</sup>

Their lives were written on top of the Good News both literally and spiritually. Christ was visible through each line of their lived story.

When Jesus reads the words of Isaiah, he layers himself on the ancient text. And as followers of Christ, we layer our lives on top of his, becoming living palimpsest where Christ is not erased nor diminished by us, but instead is visible through each line of our lived story.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-01-17/luke-414-21-3/?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_source=mailchimp&utm\\_campaign=sermon%20commentary](https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2022-01-17/luke-414-21-3/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=mailchimp&utm_campaign=sermon%20commentary)

When Isaiah first uttered these words to the Israelites, they were a discouraged and defeated group of people. They'd seen captivity and poverty. They'd heard the stories of the good ol' days of Israel, but those days seemed long gone. Their world had been spinning for generations, and they were disoriented. They had plenty of brokenness but had forgotten their guiding picture to make sense of it all. But then, this prophet Isaiah started announcing the word of the Lord, giving them a picture to fix their gaze on, and hope began to grow. When Jesus chooses this passage to read to the people of Nazareth, it was a reminder to all of them to hope again.

These words offer hope to us today. We've been given a spotting point, a guiding image that is not only hope for us but hope for others as well. Jesus, filled with the Spirit, announces who he is, his mission, and what his church will be and do. Jesus's purpose is to bring good news to the poor and disregarded. Empowered by the Spirit, our purpose is to do the same. Jesus's work is to take apart unjust systems and call out abuse of power. Our work is to do the same. Jesus's ministry is to liberate, to heal, and to forgive. Our ministry is to do the same. Not just in the future, but now. Today.

Life may seem disorienting, broken, and hopeless for you these days. Like me, maybe your eyes dart around, distracted by the latest headline, worse-case prediction, or unjust act of another. Maybe you're spinning from a recent health diagnosis or yet another cancellation to your plans. Maybe you are holding a pile of brokenness – broken relationships with others, broken dreams, or your own simple brokenness – and you don't see how God might bring something good from the pieces.

Perhaps like those who gathered hopefully in the synagogue that day in Nazareth, you, too, desperately need to hear some good news, and you wonder if Jesus will have any for you. He sits down, looks you in the eye, and says, "I do. I have come to announce good news to the poor, freedom to the burdened, sight to the blind, hope to the hopeless. This good news is for you. AND it is for all."

Bishop Karen Oliveto said, "Our sense of belovedness is our grounding." Our own hearing and accepting of the good news of Jesus for us is what grounds us. Believing we are deeply loved by God because of who God is and not because of what we do or fail to do is the unshakeable foundation we're invited to build our lives on. And it is from this foundation, as the beloved people of God, embraced by Christ and empowered by the Spirit, that we join Them in bringing good news to all. Grounded in love, we have nothing to fear. Grounded in grace, we have nothing to hoard.

The good news of Christ is for ALL even if the good news is not welcomed by all. Not everyone gathered in the synagogue in Nazareth was happy to hear what Jesus had to say. You see, good news for all can be bad news for some. We'll look at that more next Sunday.

But for today, in our world of constant chaos, we're reminded there is a more trustworthy constant for us to fix our eyes on - Jesus. Jesus is the spotting point when the world is spinning. Jesus is the picture that guides us when all we see, and feel is brokenness. Jesus is the one who grounds us when everything else seems up for grabs. May we never tire of staring at Him. May

we be living palimpsests where Christ shines through the lines of our stories. May we partner with Him in proclaiming the good news for all.