

## Sermon: January 16, 2022 – Luke 4: 14-21

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore, AB – Rev Greg Wooley

What do you consider to be your life's purpose? A couple of years ago, a team from WorshipHouse Media went around the USA asking people this question, and here is what they heard:

<https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/4577/what-is-your-purpose>

Unless you have been thinking about recently in a structured way, that would be a really hard question for many of us to answer. What is your purpose... or to frame the question a bit differently, what is your mission, or your vision. As we heard in the video, a few of the folks had a clear sense of purpose, others quoted back something that they had learned by rote or something they figured they "should" be to meet societal expectations, and a disconcerting number had never even considered it.

Our gospel reading today, from the fourth chapter of Luke, portrays Jesus walking into his hometown Synagogue in the high-country town of Nazareth, the Synagogue he had grown up in, way up in the hills northwest of the Sea of Galilee. Stepping forward to read, he finds exactly the right words from the prophet Isaiah in the scroll he had just been handed. "Unrolling it," writes Luke, "[Jesus] found the place where it is written:

<sup>18</sup> '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,

<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

<sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> He began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

Would that qualify as a mission statement/vision statement/statement of purpose? I would say so! Reaching into the beloved words of his faith tradition, Jesus, son of Joseph embraces a key role in God's big plan for the people: freedom for the imprisoned and the oppressed, healing for those who literally could not see and insight for those who would not understand, proclaiming a great big year of Jubilee. By placing this incident at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, before Jesus had even called his first disciple, the gospel writer wants us to always have this statement of purpose in mind as we witness the preaching and teaching and healings done by Jesus and his disciples. By stating these words first, Luke wants to keep reminding us that Jesus was charged with the mission of reaching to the outskirts of respectable society, and assuring those people of their full personhood in the eyes of God, and God's desire for them to have the same rights and privileges and agency as anyone else in their society.

South of the border, this weekend is a special time to remember the vision and mission and life of Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. His famous "I have a dream" speech is filled with visionary statements, expressions of God's hopes for the world that are far enough out of our reach so we must aspire to them. Dr King had specific visions for the states of Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama, and he had these very personal dreams too: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be

judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” He also had dreams that, like Jesus, aligned his vision with the vision of Isaiah (chapter 40): “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together....With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.” And while Dr King only lived long enough to see some first steps of progress toward this vision, the dream did not die with the dreamer. His vision, alongside the vision articulated by Jesus, remain very much alive in the hearts of believers today.

So we hear Jesus proclaiming his vision, his purpose... and we recall Dr King doing that as well. What about us? As this pandemic drones on, and we continue to be apart from one another with hopes of protecting one another, the task of discerning our mission, vision or purpose might not be at the top of our agenda. But experience has taught me that taking even a few moments to discern some sort of God-honouring framework for what I am up to, where I am, at this moment in my life, is critical if I am to do anything more than just stumble from brushfire to brushfire. Taking the time to prayerfully and honestly examine self, and context, and what one understands of God’s will, *and maybe even to write it down*, helps to define purpose and direction and accountability, while also reminding us that this life journey we are on is not separate from the big work that Christ is about. That may be easier said than done, as one Blursday morphs into another one, but still: examining one’s life, and regarding that life as purposeful, can be helpful to one’s mental, emotional, spiritual and even physical health.

It may seem presumptuous to move from Jesus expressing his purpose, to Martin Luther King Jr speaking of his dreams, to considering my own mission, but here’s the thing: one of the ways I can most easily short-circuit the mission of Christ in the world, is to assume that there is such a gap between influential public figures and me, or between Christ and me, that my contribution to the agenda of justice, equity and love is inconsequential. Contrary to this thought, let me say this: the things I do, the things we do, the actions and activities we engage in, our willingness to repeatedly speak the truth in love, are precisely the ways that Christ lives in the world. There are some parts of Christ’s work that need a whole bunch of willing helpers, there are parts of Christ’s work that require systemic change within societies and economies and governments, and within that multi-pronged agenda there are things that specifically need you.

And lest we think that I’m just talking about a “task” here – getting clear on one’s own purpose or mission or vision – what underlies the task, is belief. Do I honestly believe that God has a purpose for me? And for those of us with several decades under our belt, who may have been more accustomed to ask these kinds of questions earlier on as we were choosing a career path, there’s the follow-up question, does God still have a purpose for me? Because these are important questions to grapple with, later on in the

service I am going to provide some tools for us to ponder what it is that God is placing on the horizon, where God sees me fitting in to that bigger picture. {posted at <http://ralphconnor.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Personal-Mission-Statement.pdf> } A couple of weeks from now, we will be looking at these questions of mission and purpose from a group perspective – how all of us fit together as members of the Body of Christ – but today the focus is more individual and personal aspects of how God wants me to fit in with this bigger program of Isaiah, and Jesus, and Christian activists ever since Jesus: of liberation, justice, and expansive love.

Are there dangers here? Sure there are. Just as it is easy to under-estimate one's role in all this, it's also easy to over-estimate: to believe oneself to be indispensable, to misread the situation at hand or misunderstand one's own abilities, or to arrogantly believe that my wisdom can solve your problems. And yet, even with those caveats named, there is great benefit in taking the time to reflect on who you are – who you really are, in God's overall plan of love – and to ask God not only for the wisdom to see that purpose but also to pray for God's gracious guidance. Jesus walked into a synagogue filled with people who knew him from childhood, read from the scroll of Isaiah, and claimed that mission of liberation, justice and love as his own. Dr King spoke towering words that have been etched in the consciousness of all who yearn for social justice. And both of them – Jesus and Dr King – had opponents who were happy to see them dead. This work that we are called to, this over-arching Mission of Christ Jesus, is not soft or easy, it is not simple or simplistic, it does not come without change and change does not come without resistance. But the sacred call to justice does insist that from time to time we pause – and listen – and own that Jesus wants each of us and all of us to be living expressions of his heart and mind and hands and feet in this world.

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me”, said Jesus, “because God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.”

“I have a dream today” said Dr King, of a realm where “children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”.

Christ reaches out to you and through you, to embody this same vision of light and life and hope. Hear that, believe it, embrace it, rejoice in it, live it. In the name of the same Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

*References consulted or cited:*

King, Rev Dr Martin Luther, Jr. <https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>

The Virtues Project. <https://www.virtuesproject.com/virtues-definitions-1>

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