

An Inaugural Agenda
I Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21
January 21, 2007

Our nation is in an intense season of political posturing on multiple levels from local to national. New leaders have taken office and are announcing their agendas. Continuing leaders are adjusting to changing circumstances and modifying their strategies. Presidential hopefuls are announcing their candidacies.

Today we find Jesus setting the platform for his ministry. He has been baptized by the Holy Spirit. He retreated to the wilderness for forty days to wrestle with the demons that tempted him regarding the use of his power and authority. He emerges from that desert experience empowered by the Spirit of the Lord to begin his ministry.

Jesus chooses to begin his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth. The assigned readings in the synagogue were generally from the Torah, the Law of Moses. The reading from the prophets was usually the choice of the reader. Jesus intentionally selects these scriptures from Isaiah to define and set the tone for his ministry. Although a religious leader, Jesus' agenda has many political dimensions to it. Politics in the broad sense has to do with the total complex of relations between people living in society. Jesus here demonstrates his concern not solely for the spiritual welfare of his flock, but also for their social well-being. His ministry is to and about the whole person.

The original context for the Isaiah texts was a time of exile for the Israelites, who were longing to be restored to their homeland. The prophet Isaiah offers a message of hope for liberation from bondage. Jesus aligns himself with Isaiah's message of hope and the time of salvation he proclaimed.

Jesus' authority is the Spirit. He does not act of his own accord. The Holy Spirit of God baptizes him, empowers him for ministry, and anoints Jesus to "bring good news to the poor." God is present in Jesus doing something powerful, inaugurating a new age. In the Hebrew Bible anointing signifies God's providential care and presence to Israel's kings. One of the royal psalms sung of a king, says, "You love justice and hate wrongdoing; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellow kings" (Ps. 45:8). God's Spirit works within Jesus to enact a threefold ministry of preaching, healing, and releasing people from bondage to evil forces. Jesus' ministry is of God's design.

The first part of Jesus' agenda is bringing good news to the poor. Within Luke's world, the "poor" are best understood as "the marginal," those who are excluded from social and religious interaction. Exclusion in that day was based upon a number of factors, including gender, age, economic destitution, physical condition, or religious impurity. One target audience of Jesus' ministry is the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, and the excluded.

Secondly, Jesus is sent to proclaim release to the captives. The reference here is likely to the Jubilee and sabbath years prescribed in the Hebrew Scriptures. The term release indicates the forgiveness of financial debts. Luke broadens the concept of release to include forgiveness of sins, but forgiveness of financial debts remains a part of this concept. Both meanings are present when in the Lord's Prayer we pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." When first century people hear Jesus envision the release of those captive to debt, they hear him referring to poor peasant farmers who had fallen victims to a dishonest financial lending system and had consequently lost homes, families and livelihoods.

A third piece of God's vision for Jesus' ministry is recovery of sight for the blind. He is likely speaking on two levels: a literal recovery from blindness and a metaphorical recovery of the poor from an oppressive social situation. Disabilities tend to alienate people physically and socially. Jesus intends to integrate them back into society where they belong.

The fourth element of Jesus' agenda is freedom for the oppressed. This could be a summary statement of all that has been stated. He intends freedom from whatever burdens and batters people.

Jesus' ultimate goal is the year of the Lord's favor. This again may be a reference to the Jubilee year proclaimed in the Book of Leviticus. It was to be observed every fiftieth year in Israel – a kind of festival year following each cycle of seven sabbath years. In the Jubilee year, every debt was to be completely forgiven. Every piece of foreclosed land was to revert to its original owner. Every person forced into indentured service and slavery was to be freed. It was to be a supreme symbol of how God's grace frees us from the heavy burdens of our sinfulness. The Jubilee year is a vision of what life will be like when God's justice and plan for the world is restored not just for a year, but forever. Jesus comes to begin fulfillment of the eternal "year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus' inaugural agenda is radical. We know from the short tenure of his ministry and his tragic death that his agenda was not favored by the establishment. Nevertheless Jesus did not give in. He persevered in faithfulness to God's call.

The agenda for Jesus' ministry is also our agenda for ministry. The opportunities are vast. The needs are overwhelming.

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize last month highlighted one avenue in which good news is being brought to the poor. Bangladesh economist Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank have helped millions of people in developing nations move out of poverty. Through the Bank, Yunus extends small loans, known as micro credit, to the very poorest in Bangladesh, particularly women, enabling them to start small businesses. The bank has been a source of ideas and models for many institutions in the field of micro credit around the world. The Norwegian Nobel Committee, in announcing the award, noted, "Lasting peace cannot be achieved unless large population groups find ways in which to break out of poverty. Micro credit is one such means."¹

The miracle is that Yunus began the process by loaning a mere \$27 US dollars to 42 people. Today the Grameen Bank gives loans to nearly 7 million poor people, 97 percent of whom are women, in 73,000 villages in Bangladesh. Housing loans have helped women construct 640,000 houses. The bank's repayment rate is 99%; 58% of borrowers have crossed the poverty line.

Professor Yunus envisions a poverty-free world where the only place you would be able to see poverty is in the poverty museums. He says, "When school children take a tour of the poverty museums, they would be horrified to see the misery and indignity that some human beings had to go through."

In his acceptance speech, Professor Yunus spoke of the people his bank serves. "To me poor people are like bonsai trees. When you plant the best seed of the tallest tree in a flower-pot, you get a replica of the tallest tree, only inches tall. There is nothing wrong with the seed you planted, only the soil-base that is too inadequate. Poor people are bonsai people. There is nothing wrong in their seeds. Simply, society never gave them the base to grow on. All it needs to get the poor people out of poverty is for us to create an enabling environment for them. Once the poor can unleash their energy and creativity, poverty will disappear very quickly."²

This sounds much like Jesus' vision "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."

It was the dream of a prophet named Isaiah centuries before Jesus.

It was the dream of Paul who wrote to a church in conflict, "The members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater

honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect....God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (I Cor. 12:22-26).

It was the dream of President Abraham Lincoln, who issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing slaves from bondage in this country.

It was the dream of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who called a complacent church in Germany to be challenged by Christ’s call to compassion. He preached that the point of good food and prosperity we enjoy is the sign of an enormous responsibility God lays on us. It is God’s way of telling us to provide for our needy brothers and sisters. In his own words:

*If we want to understand God’s goodness in God’s gifts, then we must think of them as a responsibility we bear for our brothers and sisters. Let none say: God has blessed us with money and possessions, and then live as if they and their God were alone in the world. For the time will come when they realize that they have been worshipping the idols of their good fortune and selfishness. Possessions are not God’s blessing and goodness, but the opportunities of service which God entrusts to us.*³

It was the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who dreamed that “one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.” He had 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.”⁴

It was the dream of a church member who lived in low-income housing near his church. He attended a Thursday evening worship service with thirty to forty people, most of who lived in the streets and local shelters. The pastor writes, “One cold winter evening a man came to the service barefoot. Immediately we all noticed. The more affluent among us began to scurry around to find shoes for him. We couldn’t find any in the church. The stores were closed, so we couldn’t go out and purchase them.” Then this man “went to the shoeless man and said, ‘Take my shoes. I have another pair at home.’” This group member “did spontaneously what those...who had several pairs of shoes never thought of doing.”⁵

It is the dream of the Nothing But Nets campaign, the goal of which is to prevent malaria in Africa. Malaria accounts for up to half of all hospital admissions and outpatient visits in Africa. In addition to the burden on the

health system, malaria illness and death cost Africa about \$12 billion a year in lost productivity. The United Methodist Church, together with the National Basketball Association, the United Nations Foundation, Sports Illustrated, and other partners are working to raise donations for bed nets. A \$10 bed net can protect a family of four for up to four years, reducing the incidence of nocturnal mosquito bites – the primary means of transmitting malaria. Each year more than 500 million people are infected and more than a million die from the disease. Yet fewer than 5 percent of African children sleep under a mosquito net. Even a \$10 mosquito net makes a difference.⁶

It all begins with a dream, a vision of liberty and justice for all God's people, a hope for wholeness of creation. It moves toward reality as God's people use the gifts entrusted to them to live into that dream, taking small steps to empower one another toward wholeness of life. Those steps might take the form of a micro-loan, a mission trip to Mississippi, an afternoon of tutoring in Concord, even a pair of shoes and a mosquito net. As we use and pool our gifts, together we are the Body of Christ, fulfilling the dream of God today.

¹ *Christian Century*, November 14, 2006, p. 17.

² Muhammad Yunus, The Nobel Lecture, December 10, 2006, Oslo, Norway,
http://nobelpeaceprize.org/eng_lect_2006b.html.

³ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1955), p. 104. Quoted by Geoffrey B. Kelly, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Justice for the Poor," *Weavings*, Vol. XVII, No. 6, p. 32.

⁴ Oates, Stephen B. *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (NY: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 254.

⁵ Kenneth L. Carder, "Proclaiming the Gospel of Grace," in *Theology and Evangelism in the Wesleyan Heritage*, ed. James C. Logan (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), p. 85. Quoted by Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Leadership in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), p. 52.

⁶ "Nothing But Nets Campaign gets \$3 million challenge grant," *United Methodist News Service*, January 4, 2007,
www.unmns.org. For more information visit www.nothingbutnets.net.