

## A Sermon That Changed Everything

### Sermon for New Year's Day

Sermon Text: Luke 4:16-21



*And He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as was His custom, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and He stood up to read. <sup>17</sup> And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, <sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." <sup>20</sup> And*

*He rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

After Jesus had traveled up and down the country, healing many sick people and had a crowd of people following Him, He came to His hometown. He would preach there. You can imagine that it would be easy for Jesus to do this because He would be among people He knew. And they knew Him. When Jesus opened His mouth to preach, it quickly became clear that Jesus was not just the carpenter's son from next door but was bringing something brand new. It was as if time stopped and after that, nothing would go according to the old ways, everything would be different. In the meantime, many generations have passed again. The years and generations have passed... and we hear the words of Jesus all the way here in Leipzig. We stand at the feet of Jesus, like the listeners back then, and ask what will change in 2023 – will Jesus talk to me? And what will change in my life – when Jesus talks to me? Do I expect something to change when Jesus talks to me?

At that time, Jesus was given a big scroll and found the passage from the scroll that had prophesied about Him. It was the scroll from the prophet Isaiah which talked about the coming Messiah. The coming of this Messiah was associated with a year of the Lord's favor in the Old Testament. That meant that people who were in debt would be free. It also meant that captives would be free. Isaiah also reports that the blind would see, and the lame would walk. These are all words that the Jews at that time had often heard. It could even be that they knew these words by heart and that they all already knew exactly how what would happen after such a Scripture passage was read. The reader would roll up the scroll and the servant would return it to its spot, then they would all exchange some more pleasantries, and everyone would go home again. And everything would remain the same. In other words, the blind would not see and the lame would not walk. Nothing else would change either. Maybe just like some of us who came to church today – we hear the beautiful words of Jesus' birth, we also know that Jesus means nothing but love and goodness for us, we also know that Jesus hears our prayers, and yet we don't expect God to step into our life. We don't expect anything else either! But none of that happened back then when Jesus preached in His hometown. Everything was different then!

Jesus didn't simply pack the parchment scroll away and He also didn't just go home. No, He stood up and said something significant, which scared the people: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!" Everyone stood before Jesus with open ears and mouths – if today is the day when everything becomes different, what should change? Can it be that everything will change in my life too? At that time, when Jesus said, "Today, a new time has dawned!" it became clear that no one could go back to their everyday life as it had been. This is the precise difference between a sermon that one just listens to and a sermon where God works in our lives through His Word. What is the difference? It is Jesus. Back when Jesus preached in Nazareth, there was no long explanation, only one

thing appeared clearly – Jesus Himself stepped into their midst and presented Himself as the fulfillment of Scripture. “I am the One of whom Scripture speaks!” He announced. And with that, Jesus shows us what it can and may be about when we call ourselves the Church. Everything changes because of Jesus. And this is what struck the hearts of the listeners in Nazareth at that time, as it does for us today. The crowd listening to Jesus at that time heard not just from Almighty God, but suddenly found themselves before this mighty God Himself, before Jesus Himself. And that makes all the difference. It’s also what makes all the difference with us on this 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2023 because we aren’t just talking about Jesus today – Jesus Himself speaks to us. The church is also not like a museum where you can just listen to nice stories from the past or at best a moral measuring stick of how you can live better in our world. No, the Church is the place where God Himself comes to us and not only speaks, but also acts. This is true in everything else we do here in the Church. We don’t only talk about forgiveness; we really will forgive. We also not only receive bread and wine as a sign of Jesus so that we can think of Him, but we truly receive Jesus Himself.

Yes, and? What then? So maybe someone asks: what happens when Jesus comes? Jesus Himself describes it like this: the blind see, the lame walk, the captives become free. Indeed, all these things happen as Jesus was in Israel at that time. And yet, we are and remain guilty people and can’t just free captives or heal terminally ill people. At the same time, we should know that Jesus’ healing of the sick was not just a precursor that is a sign of complete freedom when we enter into God’s kingdom. And yet it is like this – Jesus changes our life because today, we don’t only encounter Jesus’ speech, but Jesus Himself. Sometimes He comforts us in an especially terrible predicament without anything changing the outcome at all. And sometimes, it happens that we can see that God specifically works in our life in wonderful ways and will answer our prayers. What will it be like in 2023? We see the world with hope. We see a new world dawning for those who are dying. We see in the billowing smoke of the many disasters, such as war and climate catastrophes, God’s new kingdom that He designed for us. We don’t know what will happen in 2023. Will we see Jesus throughout the year in all the tribulations? Or will the developments in our world and the cries for war and retaliation be so great that these voices become more convincing than Jesus?

Or do we eagerly await what God has in store for us in the new year? Perhaps we must imagine it all like a jigsaw puzzle. In my walk with Jesus, I see many various puzzle pieces but the complete picture still remains hidden from me. There’s a lot I can’t understand and sometimes a huge pile of unattached pieces lying in front of me or an important piece is lost. Then I don’t understand how I will make sense of everything. And yet, I long for the perfect image and work to find the different missing puzzle pieces so that the picture becomes clearer. It’s also like that for us as the Church and in our private lives too. Much still remains hidden from us now and yet, we can recognize the outlines here and there of what God has in store for us. By going to church and hearing God’s Word, I see better and clearer. The image becomes clearer when I draw closer to Jesus. But when I see the great brokenness in our world or when I look at a place and see everything but God’s kingdom there and see that people have to suffer or die, I want to give up hope. I can’t help looking at the world. It is vital that I recognize the world as it is and yet my focus is always on Jesus. Then I can still do something in one place or another so that the image of Jesus in our world can be seen more clearly again. This will happen again in 2023. We don’t know what challenges await us, our church, or our world. But we know about this picture very well, where everything is perfect. Indeed, we don’t just talk about an image, but about the living God who is actively working in our world and in our lives. And it is He who says to us: “Today the day of salvation has dawned.” Amen.