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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Epiphany 3, Series C
Sunday, January 23rd, 2022¹

Sermon: Jesus Goes to Church

Text: Luke 4:16-30

Focus: Jesus speaks a gracious Word of Good News and salvation for all who believe.

Function: That they would hear and believe God's Word as read and taught in public worship.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and His Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, 3rd Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. The Word of God before us is our Gospel lesson, especially this verse: "And [Jesus] 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" (Luke 4:16, ESV).² Last week in one of our hymns we sang, "I want to walk as a child of the light/I want to follow Jesus" (*LSB* #411:1). Very often I hear believers talk about their desire to be "more Christ-like." By this I understand most people to mean that they want God to help them to take on the personality traits of Christ: a peaceful, patient spirit and loving,

¹ I preached a different message Saturday night.

This sermon was originally preached on January 24th, 2016, at Epiphany Lutheran Church of Castle Rock.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

forgiving heart—a very admirable goal, I do say, and one to which I hope we all endeavor.

All this is very much like the W.W.J.D. movement of the 1990's. Back when I was in high school, it was popular for students to wear brightly colored bracelets lettered with the acronym W.W.J.D., which stands for “What would Jesus do?” The question itself is the oft-repeated refrain from Charles Sheldon's old book, *In His Steps*, in which he encourages his readers to ask themselves in every situation of life, “What would Jesus do?”

Well, I'm here before you today to answer that question once and for all. What would Jesus do? He would go to church! For that is what we witness in our Gospel lesson today: “As was his custom, [Jesus] went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read” (Luke 4:16). Jesus' custom, his pattern of life, his *habitus*, if you will, was to go to weekly worship and gather with other believers to pray and hear the Word of God. Each week Jesus went to the synagogue for worship. So if you want to be like Jesus, then go to church, the place where he promises to be! It's as simple as that.

Yet the fact that so many so-called Christians only go to church once or twice per month or—in the case of some—only once or twice per year, tells me one thing: they really are not at all that interested in being like Jesus. Because Jesus goes to church. If Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Creator of the entire universe, felt the need to get up and put on his Sunday best once per week to go to Sabbath services, then what makes you think it so unnecessary for you? Why do your kids' basketball games and baseball tournaments come first? Why does catching up on your sleep take precedence over spending time with your Lord? What can a weekend camping or a ski trip do for you that an hour of worship cannot? Not much. Nothing beats weekly worship with your heavenly Father and family of faith. As wonderful and beneficial as those other activities can be, they all pale in comparison to meeting Jesus at Church and listening to his Word.

When Jesus read the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah at his hometown synagogue, he outlined the program for his ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor...” (Luke 4:18a). When Jesus mentions the four things God

sent him to do, most of them have to do with preaching. Miracles of healing and other wonders are certainly part of Jesus' program, although he refused to work miracles among his unbelieving neighbors and former playmates. The most important part of Jesus' ministry was his message.

Jesus is anointed as Messiah and Christ to "proclaim good news to the poor" (v. 18). Good News means *Gospel*. We already hear and read enough bad news from the TV, radio, and Internet. Our 24/7 news media are full of reports of terrorism, disaster, and celebrity gossip. Would you not rather come to church every week to hear the Good News that God made you, loves you, and forgives your sins?

God sent Jesus to "proclaim liberty to the captives" (v. 18). The Greek word used for captives here normally means prisoners of war (Greek: *aichmalōtois*). In the context of Isaiah's prophecy, which Jesus quotes, the captives would have been the exiles in Babylon. But in our hearing today, the captives are any who are caught up and ensnared in the spiritual slavery of sin and death. To us captives Jesus proclaims "liberty." This is not the liberation theology of liberal Protestants

influenced by Marxism and Socialism. No, the word for “liberty” here is *aphesis*, which usually means “release,” or even “forgiveness,” in the New Testament. It’s the same word used in reference to John’s “baptism of repentance for the *forgiveness* [*aphesis*] of sins” (Luke 3:3). It’s also the same word used in Luke’s version of the Great Commission, where Jesus says that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [Jesus’] name to all nations...” (Luke 24:47). Thus, Jesus comes to preach forgiveness and release to those who are captive to sin and bound by the chains of addiction.

God also sent Jesus to “set at liberty those who are oppressed” (v. 18), literally, “those who are broken down and trampled upon.” Jesus comes to free those who are put down and put upon by others. He comes to lift them up and give them new life! Jesus bore our sins and iniquities to the cross so that they could no longer keep us down or destroy us.

And Jesus comes to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (v. 19), the acceptable time. In ancient Israel, the so-called Year of Jubilee, or “year of the Lord’s favor,” was to take place every 50 years as a time in

which debts were cancelled, slaves were freed, and people could return to their foreclosed property, regardless of whether or not a kinsman-redeemer had paid the price for redemption. Similar to the One Campaign today, in which activists urge Western nations to cancel the national debts of poorer nations, so also God intended for his people to cancel all debts every 50 years (Leviticus 25). The spiritual meaning of Jesus' declaration of Jubilee is that Jesus comes to set things back to zero and put things right between us and God. As the Apostle Paul writes, "Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

All of that is what Jesus preaches when he comes to the synagogue of Nazareth. And all of that is what the Lord Jesus gives to pastors and Sunday school teachers to preach and teach from the pulpit and in the classroom every Sunday morning (or Saturday night!). Good news, forgiveness (liberty), and God's favor are the hallmarks of Christian preaching and teaching. They're what we need to hear. They're the words that give life (Ps. 119:25 and John 6:68). They're why we go to

church. They're why *Jesus* went to church, and they're why he still comes to church today.

It's important for us to remember that we do *not* go to church in order to win God's approval, impress the pastor, or show off how supposedly holy we are, preening our spiritual plumage before the rest of the saints. No, we go to church because we need church, because we need each other, and because we need to hear God's Word proclaimed at church, and because we need to encounter the living God who promises to *meet* us at church. As Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20, KJV). No wonder, then, that the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Heb. 10:25, NIV).

Jesus goes wherever his people gather in his name around Word and Sacraments. "As was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day..." (Luke 4:16). Jesus goes to church. I hope you will too so that you can receive and believe the life-giving Word that Jesus wants

to give you. The Spirit of the Lord is upon him (Luke 4:18). And when you hear his Word, the Spirit of the Lord will be upon you also. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.