

Get the Most Out of Church

Luke 4:14-21 (NIV)

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. ¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ "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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ 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. ²¹ He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

What do you expect to get out of a church service? Do you expect to receive an inspiring, passionate message that really sets your heart on fire and has you clicking your heels in joy as you come out of church? Do you expect to, at the bare minimum, feel better about life after coming to church? Do you expect to hear something that you haven't heard before, a new twist or a new insight on a Bible story that gets you looking at it in an entirely new light? Do you expect a similar format and routine, a tried and true formula that you have become accustomed to in worship? Do you expect certain things to be said like the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer (in traditional King James language), Bible readings, the confession and absolution of sins? Do you expect the sermon to go over your head? Do you expect to be bored? Do you expect to feel as if your service to God is covered today because you came to worship? I don't necessarily know what your expectations are in coming to church today, what you hope to get out of it, but I don't think any of you would expect me to do what happened on that Sabbath day in Nazareth so long ago.

Jesus was gaining in popularity, becoming like a rock star of preaching and teaching. "News about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him." (verses 14-15) That makes sense because we already know who Jesus is. We know that he is the Son of God, the Savior of the world. We know that he is the fulfillment of the words from Isaiah 61. So, while everyone in Nazareth had their mind blown when Jesus dropped the mic after reading Isaiah and said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," (verses 20-21) we already knew it. And so we don't get shocked out of hearing these words.

I've heard different people at different times tell me that they don't get anything out of church. One of my roommates in college, a college where men and women are preparing to serve the Lord in full time ministry, stayed away from the chapel services because he didn't get anything out of it. Sadly, I will admit that I said a variation of that. In high school, a Lutheran high school, I would have chapel five days a week and then an hour or two of some kind of religion class every day. When it got to be Sunday morning, I would avoid church under the precept of "I've already had five days of church. What more can I get out of going on Sunday morning?"

It wasn't until I was in college that I realized how wrong I was. Who am I to say that I get nothing out of church? Jesus himself made it a habit, his custom, to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath. In other words, Jesus went to church every Sunday. We are talking about the Son of God, God himself. He wrote the book, and yet he would still go and worship every single Sabbath to listen to sinful, imperfect men tell him what the Bible says. I don't know exactly what Jesus got out of it, but he did not stay home saying, "I don't get anything out of it."

There is always something to get out of every time that you read God's Word, every time that you attend church, Bible study. It may not be earthshattering, perspective blowing new-fangled ideas or understanding that you never heard before, but you will get something to build up your faith, your trust in God.

For the original audience in Isaiah's time, they were being comforted that their future destruction of Jerusalem and their captivity in Babylon would come to an end. One anointed by the Spirit of the Lord would come to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The captives would taste freedom again. Everything would be restored. They would experience the year of the Lord's favor, the year of Jubilee, when slaves would be released and land that was repo'd would be returned to the original owner. It was a year of restoration. For the Jews of Isaiah's day, this meant that they would return to the Promised Land, back to Jerusalem.

For the Jews in Jesus' day in that synagogue in Nazareth, they were looking forward to a new fulfillment of these words. They were looking for the anointed one to come, the Messiah. They were looking for that person to finally make his appearance and save them, one who would rescue them from the tyranny of Roman rule and establish Israel as the all-dominating power of the world.

What do you get out of these words that Jesus read from Isaiah 61? Are you the poor to whom the Anointed One is proclaiming good news? If so, how are you poor? Are you materially poor? Are you not rich, not well to do? Or are you poor in regards to something else, poor in regards to what God expects of you, that you are poor in righteousness, of being the blameless and blemish free person that God demands? Are you a prisoner? Are you held captive by sin, struggling to get out of it, that you are always getting pulled right back in? Are you blinded by sin, that you have filled your head with the idea that you are good enough for God, that you deserve his love and deserve to be rescued from the evil of this world? Yet, you can't see the evil inside of you, the thoughts that you have that you want to remain hidden, the words you say that you want no one else to hear.

Jesus came to church that day because he reveled in the Word of God, because he was built up and strengthened by it, but he also came to that synagogue in Nazareth so that we would have this message today. That as you struggle with sin, as you struggle to come to terms with the evil within you, as you feel poor and worthless with all the evil that surrounds you, Jesus proclaims to you the year of the Lord's favor. He has come to free you from the control of sin. He made this announcement in history and accomplished this freedom by his ministry. God has not left you to suffer punishment. He did not cast you aside to condemnation. No, he has come and has given you freedom from your sin, a message you get by coming to church, God's gift to you.

But getting something out of church is not just what the sermon delivers. Every aspect of our worship reveals something about God. If you are feeling like you don't get anything out of church, then let's walk through our worship asking how God reveals himself to us in each section.

Our opening hymn, *Blessed Jesus, at Your Word*, asked God to stir our hearts to cause us to love and fear him. We asked that God would bring us truth and work good within us because not one else can. This is why we have come in this hour to sing praises to his name, confident of the salvation that he has won for us.

We begin our services in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in the name of the Triune God, expressing who God is as revealed in his Word. As we realize that God is this perfect three in one being, we recognize that we are not the perfection that he demands. Over the past week, we have done what we know is wrong. We did this not just by what we did or said, but even by our own thoughts. Then there's a moment when we are reminded that the punishment we deserve for these things is eternal damnation in hell. But we are sorry for our sins. We know that we have no righteousness on our own, but that God must have mercy on me, treat me not as my sins deserve if I am to have any chance of being spared from hell. God reveals to us that he has given his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He is the payment that allows him to forgive us. As Jesus is revealed as my Savior right at the start of worship, I ask him to help me live as his child in that forgiveness. God reveals himself as the one who breaks the darkness of my prison of sin. This is why I sing his praises.

In the Prayer of the Day, I ask God, as he has revealed himself, that he would use me to reveal him to others – to bring good news to the afflicted, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to those captive to sin. In God's Word, God is revealed as one who brings us freedom, who graciously makes us a part of his body of believers, as one who made it his custom to go to church every week even though he is the one who gave us the Word of God. In the creeds, we summarize our Christian beliefs. We make a statement about what we believe about God as God has revealed himself as our Maker, our Savior, and the one who gives us life as a part of his church by the forgiveness of sins.

Our Hymn of the Day almost always relates to what the pastor is going to preach on. Today, it's about praising God who revealed himself as the one who breaks the darkness - words influenced by Isaiah's prophecy, the same one quoted in our Gospel reading.

After the sermon, we sing a short song based on the words of Psalm 51. Here God reveals himself as one who does not discard us because we are blinded by sin and have hearts stained with sin. Instead, God creates a new heart within us. Although we often fail to listen to his Word and fail to get something out of it, we ask him not to take away the Holy Spirit from us. Forgive us for despising your Word thinking that there is nothing that I can get out of this. Instead, make me new. Make me new by your good news that you have saved me, that you have given me your Holy Spirit.

The offering is my chance to respond to the God who has not cast me aside but has made me new. It's one more way that I can thank God, by giving him some of the many blessings that he has given me.

In the Prayer of the Church, God reveals himself as a God who cares not about just one group of people, but for all humankind. And so we entreat God to hear and act for Jesus' sake in all aspects of the world. Help with governments, with poverty, with sickness, and the list goes on and on. We can pray confidently because Jesus has revealed that because he has forgiven us he will hear and act on the basis of his righteousness. We conclude that portion with the prayer that Jesus taught us, a prayer that reveals to us a God who actually listens and answers us as we talk to him, as one who gives us everything that we need on a daily basis.

We close with God's blessing to us. He reveals himself as a God that will keep giving and giving to us after we have left worship today. He will bless us and keep us. He will shine his glory upon us and be gracious to us. He is going to look on you with favor and give you spiritual peace. God is going to stick with us and his blessings are going to continue to be poured out on us.

We respond by singing one more hymn. Today, we thank God for revealing himself to us in his Word. We ask him to help us keep his Word pure as he is the only one who can get us through life to heaven.

There is always something to get out of worship, even when there are distractions, even when the pastor isn't the most charismatic or on fire that day, even when you are tired or stressed. We get to come here to listen to a God who breaks our chains of sin and rescues us from the blindness of sin. We get to revel in the fact that God has freed us from the consequences of our sins. Jesus made it his custom to be at church. If that's not reason enough for you to always go, then get the most out of coming by asking through the whole service, "How does God reveal himself to me here?" Doing this you will always find something worthwhile as you get to know your God, your Savior, better and better. Amen.

January 24, 2016

Pastor Jonathan Klein

pastorklein@lightofthevalley-wels.org