

Sermon

23 January 2022

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Dr Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Luke 4:14-22



When we think of Jesus today, it's easy to picture him teaching people in the synagogue. Because in a way, that's what we do on a Sunday. We gather in the church to listen to the word of God.

So this picture makes a lot of sense to us.

But you know – it didn't make a lot of sense to the people in Jesus' own time!

Because those people didn't know yet who Jesus was, and they were often surprised, or even shocked, by the things Jesus said and did.

The passage we read together this morning is no exception. This wee passage is sandwiched in between two very significant events in the life of Jesus:

It happens just after Jesus spent 40 days in the desert where he was tempted by Satan – but didn't give in, thus proving that he was truly the Son of God.

And it is followed by the people rejecting this; by the people not wanting to believe that this ordinary guy – this boy who grew up in front of them, the son of Joseph, could possibly be the messiah.

They expected someone of great importance to fulfil this role – not a wee boy whose nose they helped wipe clean or a local teenager who had the whole village in a panic when his parents couldn't find him after a festival one time.

And if we take a step back from everything WE know about Jesus, it's easy to understand *why* they felt this way.

I mean, would YOU believe it if one of our local youngsters claimed to be someone remarkable? Maybe after they become famous, you'll believe it and even be proud to know them, but before the fact? I'm not so sure.

In any case – the passage we read together is the start of Jesus' public ministry.

He was in the synagogue, as Jewish men would be, and he was handed a scroll (from what we now know as the Old Testament) to read.

There was nothing strange about any of this, it was custom for the Jewish men to take turns to do readings in the synagogue.



The scroll that was handed to him, contained words written about 700 years before, by the prophet Isaiah. Words promising someone who would come to change the world. Someone who was anointed by God himself:

“...to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

I can just imagine how everyone was hanging on Jesus’ lips as he was reading these words, eagerly awaiting the day that this messiah would come.

And *then* Jesus said: “Today this Scripture is fulfilled – in me.”

They were amazed, captivated, some probably hoping that he was speaking the truth.

Until they thought about it for a bit and realised that he was just Joseph’s son... And then they got angry at him.

But we know that he was right.



Jesus did all those things for his people, and he is still doing it for us today.

And before the people started doubting him, for a short time – Jesus was the centre of attention.

All eyes were on him. People were mesmerised by his words. He said something they all longed to hear, something they have been looking forward to for many many years.

That's the way it should have been. Jesus should have been at the centre – not only of their attention, but of their lives.

He was sitting right there in front of them, before their eyes – the Messiah, God's son.

But too quickly doubt and fear set in, and the people lost their focus.

The lesson here for us is that we should never do the same. We should SEE, realise, and appreciate what God puts right in front of our eyes.

Those people had the Saviour himself in front of them, the one pointing to God, but they didn't appreciate him for who he was.

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God still puts things and people in our lives today that point us to him.

And I would like to use our recent holiday to South Africa as an example to illustrate this.



We were so uncertain as to whether we should go... Initially, in October last year, when the Covid restrictions lifted significantly and we were allowed to travel again, we were super excited and bought tickets to go straight away.

But then Omicron broke out. And South Africa was put on the red list.

Although deep down we were still hoping to go, we reluctantly accepted that it was probably not going to happen. But then South Africa was taken off the red list again, just about a week before we were hoping to leave.

So, we started getting ready go again. Only to realise that the airline has cancelled our tickets without even notifying us. But we managed to get new tickets, and after having done a ton of paperwork and paying a fortune for the Covid tests, everything went smoothly and we could go visit our families for the 1st time in two and half years.

So much happened during this time of lockdown – we lost my brother, my aunt, and other people we knew. We could go get closure and say goodbye to them now.

Two and a half years are a long time in a child's life. The boys grew so much – Henro is even taller than his gran now, and they really needed this family time. They sat and chatted to their grandparents into the wee hours of the morning.

And then, of course, we were fortunate enough to get some much-needed Vitamin D in the sunshine!

Because of the pandemic we didn't want to travel as much as we always do when we go to South Africa, so we booked a house in a wildlife reserve and stayed there, with our parents, for most of our trip, and some other family members came and visited us too.

Now usually, at this time of year, when the trees are green and full of leaves, it's not easy to see the wild animals in a reserve.

But almost every day we say zebras.



They are beautiful animals, with their black and white stripes, and you might make the mistake of thinking that it's easy to spot them because of this, but it's not.

They are shy animals and will usually run away if they hear a car approaching, and they could be standing right next to you in a bush – with those black stripes they camouflage really well and can't be spotted easily.

A zebra can be right in front of your eyes and you might not spot it, but we *saw* them, because we *wanted* to. We were deliberately looking to find them. And we did!

And that is what our attitude towards Jesus should be too! If we *look* for him in our lives, we *will* find him – no matter how thick the leaves of difficult circumstances are growing around and in front of us.

Because Jesus is *a/ways* there! We just don't always see him, because either we don't want to, or we are blinded by other things.

But if we just notice what God puts right in front of our eyes, our lives can be so different...



Look, here the shy zebras seem to even be looking right at the camera, as if they are posing for a photo!



The same thing happened with the giraffes. Giraffes are my favourite animals.

They are so gracious, and I love the way they walk, as well as their big eyes with their thick, long eyelashes.

You very often find zebra and giraffes grazing together – and that's because God made them so amazing. The giraffes eat the leaves from the tops of the trees, and the zebra eat the grass below. They make room for each other.



Something else I love about giraffes, is that they take good care of their young – as you can see in this picture.



And here, once again, this giraffe looks as if it is enjoying its photo shoot!

To see giraffes every single day was such a bonus, because we have been on safaris before where we had to look for hours before we found one. Like the zebras they can blend in with their surroundings very well, and when amongst tall trees, there is no way you will see them if you don't actively try and find them.

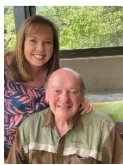
But this time they were right there in front of our eyes.

And to me – they were pointing straight to God. Every single time I saw a zebra or giraffe it reminded me how great our God is – for making these different animals to live alongside each other, for forming their bodies in such a way that they can survive in nature – from their thick eyelashes to protect their eyes against the sun, to the hairy bit at the bottom of their tails to keep the flies away.

God thought of absolutely everything. And during our holiday, he reminded me of that daily through these animals. Just like they are *made* to survive in their surroundings, so are we.

We've all had a rough couple of years, with the pandemic and everything else we've had to cope with; but we've made it this far, because we are not alone. And if we just keep focussing on the things that remind us that God is in control, and don't fall in that deep dark pit of doubt and fear, we will be okay.

I'm so thankful that I got to see my dad,



and Andre's mum.



That we could hug each other, laugh, and cry. Things we took for granted before Covid struck.

And I'm thankful that now we can carry on with our lives again, newly reminded that through all the heartache and pain, God's love for us is beautiful.

Let's make a point of always noticing *that*, no matter what is going on in our lives.

The word of God should be the centre of our attention, the centre of our lives, every single day.



Just like we take photos today to later remind us of special memories, the people in Biblical times wrote things they needed to remember down.

This was the case with the scroll Jesus read from, and it's still the case with our Bible today.

That's why we start every worship service by bringing the Bible in – to remind us that what we are doing here on a Sunday should be about the word of God, and nothing else.

Jesus' peers failed to notice what was right in front of their eyes. Let's not do the same.

Let's see what God wants to show us this year, let's hear what God wants to tell us this year, and let's then live every moment to his glory.

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Even though none of us have been able to travel for a long time – we are travelling through life every single day...



So let's set off into 2022 with our eyes, our hearts, and our hands wide open.

I want to conclude this sermon with the words a friend sent to me on the 1st of January:

FLIGHT 2022 INSTRUCTIONS:

Good morning and welcome to Flight 2022.

We are prepared to take off into the new year.

Please make sure your positive attitude and gratitude are secured and locked in the upright position.

All self-destruct devices: pity, anger, selfishness, pride and resentment should be turned off at this time.

All negativity, hurt and discouragement should be put away.

Should you lose your positive attitude under pressure during this flight, reach up and pull down a prayer.

Prayers will automatically be activated by faith.

Once *your* faith is activated, you can assist other passengers who are of little faith.

There will be no baggage allowed on this flight.

God, our Captain, has cleared us for take-off.

Destination: Greatness!

May God bless every single one of you in 2022!

Amen