

Go Therefore... - 1.SJXSO: Serving Jesus by Serving Others
Luke 4:14-21
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My very first day of my very first job, I signed my paperwork and was sent to STORM Camp. Pastor Phil Strom at Elk River UMC told me, "STORM is a big deal around here, and it's important that you really understand what it's all about."

I had no Youth Ministry training. I wasn't active in my youth group growing up. I had never even *been* to Camp.

But here I was, in a tie-dye t-shirt and green, like, sweatpants (first impressions are everything), driving to Northern Pines Camp in Park Rapids to "meet my students" and *experience* STORM Camp.

Dave Brown, the founder and then-director of STORM gave me residential addresses and told me to go "see some groups" in action. I met Catie – who Pastor Phil told me was a "rockstar of the youth group." I met other students and adults. I met STORM staff members. It was awkward, I was out of place, and it was the *Thursday* of a week-long camp. Relationships and rhythms had been established. And I knew nobody.

Each night at STORM Chapel, students have an opportunity to share testimonies of how they're seeing God at work. I haven't ever seen a night like this since, but that night, the testimonies were INTENSE. Youth were dealing with big, heavy, hard things – one student said, "I was going to kill myself after camp. But I'm not going to do that now."

And all I could think was, "What did I sign up for?!"

That was then, this is now. And now, I serve as the Director of STORM Camp, along with Catie, the youth I met on my first day (she was a graduating senior, so there's only 4 years difference). And while I haven't ever seen a testimony night quite like that first night, I have seen the incredible power of God moving through STORM Camp. I get to see cool things like Ann and Rick Garland, who serve as STORM staff and on the STORM board – Ann did STORM with her kids as they moved through the Youth program at Messiah, and then 12 years ago, Ann and I were both invited to join STORM staff as Major Group Leaders. Ann has trained in almost all of our new STORM staff and Rick is an integral part of our STORM board. The rest of our staff – get this – I've been *their adult* in some capacity. I've been their driver at Camp, or I've been their youth leader, or I've mentored them in their first years of youth ministry. Ann's got the longest tenure, but the rest of my staff team has at least 10 years of STORM experience because they've been participants since they were 12 years old. And they've grown and developed in their faith and as leaders – from middle school campers to the staff team that now makes it happen.

We do two things at STORM Camp: Work and Worship. STORM stands for Service To Others in Relational Ministry. We Serve Jesus by Serving Others.

And it's truly been an honor to be part of the people who make that happen – and to watch students have an incredible week – or an incredible few weeks – or an incredible decade being part of what we do at STORM Camp.

Now, the first mission trip I ever went on, I was in charge of. YouthWorks was offering Spring Break mission trips for college kids, and I was leading a student group called SHINE at St. Thomas. My mom bought me a camping mat to sleep on and after the trip she returned it, saying, “you probably won’t need this, you won’t do something like this again.”

SIXTEEN YouthWorks Mission Trips later ... three in college and 13 with youth..., I’ve come to deeply understand the importance of the “Life Changing, Christ-Centered Mission Trips” YouthWorks has to offer.

We step into small towns and big cities and serve and learn more about the communities – and maybe understand a little more about *our* community while we’re at it. We get in the habit of doing daily devotionals, we listen to community speakers, we get out and see what there is to see, and we wrap up the day with some songs and games and teaching and discussion. Church Group Time – the last thing in a YouthWorks schedule – is my favorite time because It helps us connect what we’re doing all week to who we’re becoming – both as followers of Jesus, but also as young leaders in the church, school, and community.

Our kids are going to do great things one day. And because they’ve seen some struggling communities, have learned about food insecurity, have partnered with social service organizations, I trust that they’ll take these experiences into the classrooms and board rooms and hospitals and c-suites they land in.

I trust that they’ll advocate and do something for the poor and powerless, that they’ll know how important it is to listen to people’s stories, and will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to live out their faith in purposeful and meaningful ways. I believe that through these young people and STORM Camp and Mission Trips, the Good News of the Gospel is embodied.

So, let’s look at this Good News in Luke 4. I preached on this at STORM last month, so let me give you a little context:

Luke begins with a lot of Old Testament imagery and references. Which is important for setting the scene for this text. We start with Elizabeth and Zachariah learning they’ll be having a baby, who will become John the Baptist. Their story echoes Abraham and Sarah’s. Then Mary, mother of Jesus, finds out she’s going to have a baby and her song – the Magnificat – pulls from all over the Old Testament. I’ve heard it said that, it’s like, say you’re watching a play unfold in the spotlight on the stage, but on a screen behind the live action is a sepia-toned reel of all the things that it’s referencing.

Luke is like that – there’s innumerable callbacks to the Old Testament. This matters because much of the Old Testament is stories of Israel – God’s chosen people – failing to uphold their promises to God, and then repenting, and turning back to God – over and over again. There’s this continued promise of a coming Messiah, one who is going to save the Israelites from themselves – one who is going to make things right. That’s how the Old Testament ends. And this is where Luke begins (but there’s, like, 400 years between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament).

The Bible Project – the videos we use for Middle School Youth Group – has a great podcast on this and they say, “Instead of just saying Jesus fulfills the prophetic predictions of the Old Testament, Luke tells the stories that just like ooze with Old Testament echoes and resonance to show that the story of Jesus, even before he was an adult, was already fulfilling the essence of the story of the Old Testament.

This upside-downness, this reversal of bringing rulers down but lifting up the humble, that's going to be the essence of what Luke highlights of Jesus' kingdom of God announcement of this reversal of values, and reversal of status, and Jesus exalting the poor. “

“He went to Nazareth, his hometown, where he'd been brought up. On the Sabbath, he went to the synagogue like his custom was and he stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him.

Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written — and he quotes from Isaiah 61, though he sprinkles a little Isaiah 58 in there too. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me.” “Anoint,” Hebrew words “mashach,” it's where we get the word Messiah - Anointed One. He “Messiah-ed” me to proclaim basar - good news. This is the word that becomes euaggelion in Greek - gospel. To proclaim gospel to the poor. The Good News. And what's the Good News? He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

This is how Jesus launches his ministry. It's a really important poem from Isaiah 61. But the key repeated words are highlighted here, are freedom is repeated twice, and the poor. Because he's announcing good news for the poor specifically.

So when Luke wants you to think of Jesus, he wants you to think of a messianic figure hoped for by the prophets, he's bringing good news and freedom for the poor.”

And we've already heard a lot about the poor in this story – poor doesn't mean they didn't have wealth. “The word “poor” in the Hebrew Bible refers more to difficult circumstances, which could be economic, but also being dishonored, or shamed or being a social outsider.”

“I suppose what's upside down is that these are the kinds of people that Jesus chooses to spend most of his time with. These are the people that he notices and moves towards when he goes into a town. These are the people that he recruits as the leaders of his movement.”

Like an elderly couple who couldn't have children. A young, unmarried, pregnant woman. A wild prophet who dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts and honey. The outsiders are already the stars of the show.

And this is what defines Luke's gospel. The stories of Jesus and the outsiders, the outcasts, the weird and wild and unexpected.

And this is where our stories intersect.

Because I don't know if you've ever met a group of teenagers, but they are weird. And wild. And outside of the general, popular power-structure. They're awkward and often thought of as too young, too inexperienced to lead. And yet, they're actively participating in bringing the Kingdom of God into these ordinary moments of serving others.

And they're coming alongside people who are often overlooked, undervalued – on mission trips we serve a lot of people who face housing and food insecurity. At STORM, we serve people who need help with projects large and small. We're thrust into these unlikely situations – in the middle of a town we've never been in, invited into someone's home, and the circumstances force us to be present. To show up. To engage with the situation. To *actively do something* to make their world – to make the world – *better*. Our Youth are good-news bringers – Gospel doers – when they're on these trips.

A few chapters later, in Luke 7, we find John the Baptist – who's been part of this story from the beginning. He's in prison, but he knows that Jesus has been doing allthethings.

“18 John’s disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, 19 he sent them to the Lord to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

So the men asked Jesus, “are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.”

I love the direct reference to Luke 4. Luke 4 is this profound declaration – and Luke 7 holds doubt. Both are important to understanding what’s going on here in the upside-down kingdom. Both are important as we navigate our own role in this story. Is it *you*? Are you *sure*?

“Are you worth it? Is this worth it?”

What did I sign up for?”

But Jesus is saying, “I’m doing what I came here to do.”

Jesus says, it’s me. I’m here. I’m bringing the Kingdom of God right here in this place – where the weak are made strong, where the sick and hurting are healed, where sins are forgiven, where things are made *right*.

Salvation is here. The Messiah – the Anointed One – The Rescuer – The Redeemer – has come. This *is* what you think it is.

But it’s not what you thought it would be.

It’s a Kingdom filled with the unlikely, unexpected, unpopular – and it’s a Kingdom that cares about the under-resourced, the lonely, the marginalized.

These mission trip opportunities – they usher in the Kingdom of God – here, and now, where the poor and marginalized are seen and supported. Where Jesus is *still* making things *right*.

Healing. Forgiving. Helping. Bringing hope.

Where unlikely leaders are formed and developed. Where Jesus partners with the weird and wild and awkward and the young to *shine* into the world.

We serve Jesus by serving others.

We’re doing what we came here to do.

And it’s worth it.

I wasn’t able to watch the meteor shower last week – I live in an apartment in downtown St. Paul. But when I was younger, and living in a small town, my mom and I would park her convertible into the driveway, put the top down crank up the heat, recline the seats, and watch for the incredible, beautiful streaks of light. Extraordinary moments amid ordinary circumstances.

“A meteor shower is a celestial event in which a number of meteors are observed from one point in the night sky. These meteors are caused by streams of cosmic debris entering Earth’s atmosphere at extremely high speeds.” The *impact* causes the streak of light we see from the ground. The Persied Meteor Shower is an annual event that usually peaks on August 12-13.

I like to think about Youth Missions like this. We're just passing through a community for a week, but the *impact* is incredible and beautiful. These extraordinary moments in ordinary things – like mowing a yard, or sorting clothing at a thrift store – but God's kingdom shines through, if only for these small moments that you may only see if you're looking for them. In my time at Messiah, we've issued 120 purple candles to individuals participating in STORM Camp or High School Mission Trips through YouthWorks. Many of those individuals have done several trips. I'm honored to come alongside them as they find ways to live out their faith in these beautiful streaks of light. I interviewed a few of them to share a little bit about why these experiences matter, and how they've been impacted. That's the Good News, my friends. That's the good news.

Will you pray with me?

Lord, we thank you for opportunities to be Kingdom-Bringers, to care for the poor, to welcome the stranger, to meet the needs of the marginalized. Help us to daily see and meet the needs of others.

Bless our youth and youth leaders, that the experiences they have at STORM Camp and on Mission Trips may be life-changing – for those they are serving, and for them as they serve.

Holy Spirit, move among them, ready them for the work of ministry and mission.

And help us all to Serve Jesus by Serving Others, through work and through worship.

Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of August 20, 2023

Weekly Prayer

God of the world, through Jesus Christ, you reached out to humanity to bring salvation and abundant life. Help me to love as you love, so that all creation may live in the fullness of your abundant life. Amen.

Monday, August 21

Scripture: Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. Jesus came near and spoke to them, "I've received all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I've commanded you. Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age."

Observation

Our guiding verse for this series comes from the final verses in Matthew's gospel, shortly after the resurrection. Jesus is preparing his followers for "what's next," knowing that the season of traveling and ministering together has closed. Now the ministry of Jesus will continue through his followers, their love, and teachings.

Application

Jesus begins, saying he's "received all authority in heaven and on earth" (v18). How might this bring you confidence in the ways you follow Jesus? Might these words help minimize any worry or fear, remembering that Christ has "received authority" and now shares it with you?

Prayer

Beloved Jesus, as I study your story and teachings, help me to understand your intention, giving me guidance for the ways that I follow you today. Amen.

Tuesday, August 22

Scripture: Luke 4:1-13

Jesus returned from the Jordan River full of the Holy Spirit, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness. There he was tempted for forty days by the devil. He ate nothing during those days and afterward Jesus was starving. The devil said to him, "Since you are God's Son, command this stone to become a loaf of bread." Jesus replied, "It's written, *People won't live only by bread.*" Next the devil led him to a high place and showed him in a single instant all the kingdoms of the world. The devil said, "I will give you this whole domain and the glory of all these kingdoms. It's been entrusted to me and I can give it to anyone I want. Therefore, if you will worship me, it will all be yours." Jesus answered, "It's written, *You will worship the Lord your God and serve only him.*" The devil brought him into Jerusalem and stood him at the highest point of the temple. He said to him, "Since you are God's Son, throw yourself down from here; for it's written: *He will command his angels concerning you, to protect you and they will take you up in their hands so that you won't hit your foot on a stone.*" Jesus answered, "It's been said, *Don't test the Lord your God.*" After finishing every temptation, the devil departed from him until the next opportunity.

Observation

Jesus' ministry begins with temptation in Luke's gospel. He is baptized, and then immediately tempted by the devil in the wilderness. The Devil tempts him three times, collectively offering Jesus control over the whole world. At its core, Jesus is being tempted to place his trust in a place outside of God.

Application

What tempts you to minimize your trust in God? Are there areas where you rely more on _____ than God? Of course, God has given us experience, reason, and resources to better equip us. Trusting God does not mean excluding or ignoring experts, trusted friends, or technological advancements. But, as you listen to the beating of your heart: is your life grounded in trust of God? Or does something else -- fear or worry, desires for success or stability -- drive you? How might you center yourself in God today?

Prayer

God of my life, be my life. Guide my actions, feelings, behaviors, thoughts, and words to be rooted in you. Be at work in my life, in the people and circumstances around me, and help me to be guided and grounded by your grace. Amen.

Wednesday, August 23

Scripture: Luke 4:14-21

Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news about him spread throughout the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. Jesus went to Nazareth, where he had been raised. On the Sabbath he went to the synagogue as he normally did and stood up to read. The synagogue assistant gave him the scroll from the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to liberate the oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. Every eye in the synagogue was fixed on him. He began to explain to them, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it."

Observation

Having been baptized *and* tempted, Jesus returns to Nazareth (his hometown) and preaches in his home synagogue. He grounds his message in the words of Isaiah, telling the people that Jesus is *the one* who has come to fulfill these words.

Application

I love this passage, because it gives us immediate insight into the words that will guide the *entire* ministry of Jesus. He is telling us up front what his priorities will be: preaching good news to the poor, releasing the prisoner, recovery of sight to the blind, liberating the oppressed, and proclaiming God's goodness. I think this tells us, as followers of Jesus, what we should set as priorities, too. Spend time today reflecting on these words: what do they mean to you? How is "the spirit of the Lord upon you" today?

Prayer

Spirit of God, pour out your wisdom and clarity upon me today. Help me to notice the people and places you are calling me. Give me courage to make the guiding principles of Jesus' ministry my own. May all the world, at last, know your liberating justice, love, and peace. Amen.

Thursday, August 24

Scripture: Luke 4:22-30

Everyone was raving about Jesus, so impressed were they by the gracious words flowing from his lips. They said, "This is Joseph's son, isn't it?" Then Jesus said to them, "Undoubtedly, you will quote this saying to me: 'Doctor, heal yourself. Do here in your hometown what we've heard you did in Capernaum.'" He said, "I assure you that no prophet is welcome in the prophet's hometown. And I can assure you that there were many widows in Israel during Elijah's time, when it didn't rain for three and a half years and there was a great food shortage in the land. Yet Elijah was sent to none of them but only to a widow in the city of Zarephath in the region of Sidon. There were also many persons with skin diseases in Israel during the time of the prophet Elisha, but none of them were cleansed. Instead, Naaman the Syrian was cleansed." When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was filled with anger. They rose up and ran him out of town. They led him to the crest of the hill on which their town had been built so that they could throw him off the cliff. But he passed through the crowd and went on his way.

Observation

The people hearing Jesus' message are "raving about Jesus" and impressed by his words. Apparently, Jesus couldn't just say "thank you" and be done with it. Instead, he tells them that "no prophet is welcome in their hometown" and one day, Jesus will disappoint them. Turns out, that moment is now -- because the people turn on him, and run him out of town!

Application

I, too, have preached in my home church early in my ministry. It was incredibly meaningful – and frightening – as I wanted to “do good” by the people who raised me and fostered my call to ministry. Fortunately, they did not try to run me off a cliff, but instead were encouraging to my continued discernment of ministry. I wonder who the preachers, leaders, and teachers are among our congregation now? Who are the young adults that our community can encourage and foster their own discernment and growth? How are we adapting as a congregation to embrace and encourage them? Say a word of thanks for the kids, youth, and young people in your life and church.

Prayer

God, stir up your presence within our community. Light a spark within your young people, that they might clearly identify the ways you are present to them, and encouraging them to lead. Help us who are “more seasoned” to be flexible and curious, as we raise up new leaders. Amen.

Friday, August 25

Scripture: Luke 4:31-37

Jesus went down to the city of Capernaum in Galilee and taught the people each Sabbath. They were amazed by his teaching because he delivered his message with authority. A man in the synagogue had the spirit of an unclean demon. He screamed, “Hey! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are. You are the holy one from God.” “Silence!” Jesus said, speaking harshly to the demon. “Come out of him!” The demon threw the man down before them, then came out of him without harming him. They were all shaken and said to each other, “What kind of word is this, that he can command unclean spirits with authority and power, and they leave?” Reports about him spread everywhere in the surrounding region.

Observation

Never discouraged by the previous day, Jesus’ ministry begins at a fast pace. He moves on to Capernaum, about 40 miles from Nazareth. He immediately begins to heal those around him. And even the demons are quick to recognize Christ’s authority.

Application

Jesus frequently heals people physically. But Christ also brings us healing in other ways, too: in our spirits, our relationships, our thoughts and feelings. What areas of your life might you offer up to Christ today? How might you ask Jesus to bring healing and wholeness to your life?

Prayer

Healing Christ, you know the places in my life -- my heart, body, and mind -- that are in need of healing today. Make your tender voice, your gentle touch, your everlasting love, bring healing and wholeness to my life. Amen.

Saturday, August 26

Scripture: Luke 4:38-44

After leaving the synagogue, Jesus went home with Simon. Simon’s mother-in-law was sick with a high fever, and the family asked Jesus to help her. He bent over her and spoke harshly to the fever, and it left her. She got up at once and served them. When the sun was setting, everyone brought to Jesus relatives and acquaintances with all kinds of diseases. Placing his hands on

each of them, he healed them. Demons also came out of many people. They screamed, "You are God's Son." But he spoke harshly to them and wouldn't allow them to speak because they recognized that he was the Christ. When daybreak arrived, Jesus went to a deserted place. The crowds were looking for him. When they found him, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said to them, "I must preach the good news of God's kingdom in other cities too, for this is why I was sent." So he continued preaching in the Judean synagogues.

Observation

This chapter closes by making clear that Jesus continues to heal many people. Understandably, as he does, communities have a strong desire to keep Jesus close. But rather than stay, Jesus says, "I must preach the good news of God's kingdom in other cities too, for this is why I was sent." (v 43)

Application

This encourages me in a few ways: Jesus (1) keeps clear to his ministry and calling, (2) understands that even he cannot "do it all," and (3) seems to model that even fruitful ministries have a season. How might this guide your living today? Can you name, with clarity, how God is calling you? Can you understand and trust that you have boundaries too, and cannot do it all (yes, you). Is there something you need to pause, or let go, so that you can follow God more fully?

Prayer

Holy Christ – you are my Savior, brother and friend. But you are my teacher, too. Thank you for the ways that you teach and model ways of living that keep the focus on God's call, while setting boundaries and limits. Help me to do the same. Amen.