

*Epiphany 3C
Luke 4:14-21
January 26, 2025*

*“Six Words”
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Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

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The phrase “economy of words” regularly circulates in my consciousness as I write sermons, prayers, articles, and reports. The idea being, of course, to get the point across as clearly as possible in as few words as possible. “It means revising your work to eliminate redundant, unnecessary, cliché, or weak language to make your writing stronger and clearer.”¹ Sometimes I succeed. Sometimes I don’t. But I do think about it. And I do try.

¹Stacia M. Fleegal, “Writers, Master the Art of Word Economy.” Medium.com, June 7, 2019:
<https://medium.com/swlh/writers-master-the-art-of-word-economy-31900bc38dcf>.

In a rather extreme example of this, legend has it that Ernest Hemingway once accepted a ten-dollar bet while lunching with some other writers that he could write a novel in six words. After completing the exercise and passing around a napkin with the now-famous line on it, he collected his ten dollars. The line? “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” There really is a whole story there, just beneath the surface of the words.

A few years ago, editor Larry Smith picked up the idea of Hemmingway’s six-word story and started the six-word memoir project. He challenged writers to submit six-word stories about themselves and compiled them into a New York Times bestseller. While extreme in their economy of words, the submissions range from hilarious to heart-breaking to hopeful. Things like: “Cursed with cancer, blessed with friends,” or “Timid teacher takes ‘tude from tykes.”² It’s an interesting concept and it got me thinking, if we challenged ourselves to the same exercise, what six words would we use to summarize our lives? What’s your six-word memoir?

Prophets are not exactly known for their economy of words, but in our reading from Luke’s gospel, Jesus chooses his words very carefully from the prophet Isaiah: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.*” It’s definitely more than six words, but, for Luke’s author, these are the words that define Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus is anointed by God and sent forth in the spirit to bring good news for those poor, to proclaim release to those in bondage and sight to those blind, freedom for those oppressed, and the year of God’s favor – the year of Jubilee when all who are enslaved or in servitude are freed.

² Rachel Fershleiser and Larry Smith, eds, *Not What I Was Planning To Write: Six-Word Memoirs by Writers Famous and Obscure*. Harper Perennial, 2008.

But this isn't new with Jesus. It's a continuation of the work that God has always been about, as attested by the prophet. Jesus is picking it up in his time and place. Much the way Luke tells us Jesus' mother, Mary, picked it up in hers as she sang: *“God has shown strength with their arm; and has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”*

It's said differently, but Isaiah, Mary, and Jesus were all attesting to what is commonly referred to as God's preferential option for the poor and the oppressed. Good news. Liberation news. Plenty, even abundance.

We're in the season of epiphany, the season of revelations, and realizations, and “aha” moments that reveal the holy in our midst; that bring into focus the big and little ways divinity moves among us, even wears our skin; that bring Jesus, his identity, life, and purpose into clearer and clearer view. Today, we see Jesus: “empowered for good news and liberation.” That's six words, by the way.

But Epiphany can also be an opportunity to learn more about ourselves, our identity and purpose. I'm curious to hear what you might call, “our six words.” The six words that best describe New England Congregational Church. Surely, we too walk humbly in the footsteps of Prophet Isaiah, Mother Mary, and Jesus of Nazareth. In some way, this message of good news and liberation is both our heritage and our charge.

We also walk humbly in the footsteps of a pious and independent people, the early separatists we know as Pilgrims. We walk humbly in the footsteps of our founders, abolitionists and egalitarians that believed in the equality of all people regardless of ethnicity or gender. We walk humbly in their footsteps, but the path ahead is our own. Who are we

charged and empowered to be in this place, in this moment, for just such a time as this? What are our six words?

I challenge you to take this question seriously this week and I'd love nothing more than for my email to be flooded with your 6-word summaries of New England Church. As we move into Annual Meeting and into another year, it's more important than ever that we have a clear sense of who we are and what we're about, for the sake of each other, our community, and our world. May it be so. Amen.