

Sermon #245
Luke 4:14-21
June 24, 2018, [Slide 1, title slide](#)

The Rescue Mission

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Walter McMillian, an African American, grew up in a severely poor area outside of Monroeville, Alabama. Life was hard for this pulpwood businessman who was married with three children. Then in December of 1987 his whole life took a downward plunge when he was arrested and wrongfully convicted for the murder of a young woman that he didn't even know. On the day of the murder, he was nowhere near the dry cleaners where the young woman was killed, but was twelve miles away at a family reunion where many alibies claimed he could not possibly have killed this woman.

McMillian was arrested by a sheriff under public pressure and sent to death row without even a trial. Later a quick trial was held where an all-white jury convicted him based on lies from witnesses who perjured themselves on the stand. The jury gave him life without parole, but the judge used an Alabama practice called "Judge override" to send McMillian to death row, where he stayed in a horrible prison condition for six years while he awaited his execution. There he lost all hope of becoming a free man again.

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That's when a team of young lawyers lead by Bryan Stevenson, a recent Harvard Graduate, began their rescue mission, as Bryan relates the story in his book, Just Mercy. From their interviews with Walter and others who had been with Walter on that day, Stevenson's team began to accumulate much evidence that proved beyond doubt that Walter was innocent. But it took six long years and four denied appeals by the Alabama Court of Criminal Appeals, before Walter was finally exonerated. One key witness the state had provided against Walter recanted and clearly stated that he had lied on the witness stand because of pressure from the officers. [\(Slide 4\)](#) On March 2, 1993, Walter became a free man. All five judges agreed that Stevenson's team had accumulated solid evidence and ruled that McMillian should go free. What joy awaited all his family and friends as Walter walked free from the jail on that day. The rescue mission was complete.

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In life, there are all kinds of rescue missions. It might be a stranded motorist in a snow storm, or a hiker trapped in a cavern, a little child lost in the woods far from home, or a prisoner like Walter McMillian, wrongfully convicted and sent to death row with very little hope of exoneration. But is that all there is to the rescue mission of the church? This is the topic for today in the next sermon in our series on the church and the Spirit during this season of Pentecost.

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In Luke chapter 4, Jesus is on a mission. News has spread through the whole countryside about Jesus as he now returns to his hometown of Nazareth in the "power of the Spirit" (v. 14). On the Sabbath, Jesus stands up in the synagogue, as was his custom, and reads from the scroll of Isaiah in chapter 61, verses 1 and 2:

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“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (v. 18, 19).

Jesus abruptly ceases reading and rolls up the scroll while every eye is fastened on him. He gives the scroll back to the attendant, sits down and announces to the crowd, *“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”* (v. 21). The crowd is amazed. How can he speak so well? Isn’t this Joseph’s son? They were probably also wondering about his reference to that scripture being fulfilled on that day.

Even at first glance, it seems apparent that Jesus is announcing that he himself is on a rescue mission. It’s his inauguration moment. His kingdom has come and just what is his mission all about? In his mission:

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I. Who needs to be rescued?

In the passage, the prophet mentions the poor, prisoners, or captives, the blind, and the oppressed. All are groups of needy or marginalized people; people who certainly need rescuing. When Isaiah originally spoke these words, he was thinking of a time well beyond his own when Israel and Judah would be conquered and taken into exile. They themselves would be the captives and the oppressed, because of their rebellion against God. But there would also be a time of release from their captivity – a time when God would comfort them and bring them back home.

The rescue mission is a major theme throughout the whole OT story. Long before Isaiah’s time, God rescued his people from bondage in Egypt and brought them to the promised land, their new home. Jesus’ audience knew all about that; release from bondage was a prominent part of their history. They were the poor, the prisoners, and the captives. They, were the ones who had needed rescuing, especially in their time, as they faced the cruel Roman rule.

But Jesus’ rescue mission includes more than just the house of Israel. Its central purpose is not about restoring national pride. His rescue mission is all about kingdom values and rescuing people from whatever bondage they find themselves in. Jesus would later go on in this same story to talk about the Gentiles and include them in the story of redemption. And the hometown Nazarenes would not be happy about that.

The rescue mission then includes all people, Jews and Gentiles, for all are in need today in whatever form. And Jesus’ kingdom is all about rescuing people from bondage and from the values of this world. Today, those in need of rescue include African Americans like Walter McMillian who are oppressed by an unjust, racially biased system. The rescue list includes the elderly who are often taken advantage of by scam artists and thieves who prey on the vulnerable of our society. The list includes women

who are mistreated by men or not given equal pay for the same type of job or are passed over for men who may not be as well qualified as they are. The list includes ethnic groups and foreigners who are asked to do the work that most Americans don't want to do and are paid minimal salaries often with less than ideal working conditions. It includes immigrants who have no where to turn for survival and are turned away by an inept immigration system or whose families are torn apart and children taken away from them. The land of the free and the brave did not become so free for them and is often far from the kingdom values that Jesus brought in.

But the needy on the rescue list goes beyond that. It includes everyone of us. All of us need to be rescued. You need to be rescued. I need to be rescued. It's not just those people "out there" who need rescued, but all of us. We all need to be able to say, "Lord, please rescue me from me – from my sin and my rebellion and my selfish ways and my foolish pride. I am one of the captives, a prisoner to sin who needs to be rescued. I need released from my oppression." The song writer of old, John Newton, confessed it well when he wrote, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!" He knew that he needed rescuing. Do we know that? Thank God there is one who rescues us. He's the very one who is the center of this story.

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II. Who are the rescuers? Who makes up the rescue mission team?

A. Jesus, the anointed one

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The rescue team is lead by Jesus himself, the greatest defense attorney of all time, far greater than Bryan Stevenson and his legal team. Remember that the story begins with Jesus coming to Nazareth "*in the power of the Spirit*" (v. 14). And remember that after reading the scripture, Jesus said, "*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*" When he said that, he was referring to himself as the anointed one of God that Isaiah had prophesied about centuries earlier. He was putting himself on the same level as God. He is the rescuer.

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The Year of the Lord's favor had come in the person of Jesus Christ. In Leviticus 25, that we read earlier, God called his people to celebrate the Year of Jubilee, which was to take place every fifty years as a "sabbath year of sabbath years." In this Year of Jubilee, all the slaves were to be freed, all debts were to be cancelled, and the land was to have rest. This is what Isaiah saw too, a year of rest for his people from their captivity. Then Jesus comes and proclaims here in Luke 4, that the Year of the Lord's favor has indeed come. The era of God's salvation and complete rest had come for all captives in the person of Jesus himself.

Praise God, that no matter how far we have strayed in life, no matter how wretched we have become, he can rescue us from ourselves. No matter how far our society has rebelled, there is still hope, because of Jesus the rescuer, the one who is the Year of the Lord's favor.

Today, if you don't know his power in your life, he can rescue you as you say "yes" to Jesus. You can say, "Jesus, come and cleanse me of my sin and make me a new person." Then believe that he will rescue you from you. If you have already given your life to Jesus and repented of your sins, then you are already rescued. You are a redeemed child of God and you are now part of his rescue mission team. Glory to God!

A pastor by the name of Matt visited a man in prison, who had been on death-row for 21 years because he had killed a teenage girl. Pastor Matt asked him if God's grace had overcome his sense of guilt. The prisoner replied that he was not proud of what he had done, but he also felt that his sorrow had led to true transformation in Christ. He said, "I will never forget my crime. But there has to come a point where you receive forgiveness and then forgive yourself. Not to justify your actions, but to accept God's love... I am a person who is loved and forgiven by God. Jesus has already set me free." Even though this man remains in prison, he no longer is bound by sin and has become part of the rescue mission of the church. Jesus is the rescuer, and his church, the rescued, is now part of the rescue team.

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B. His church is called to assist in the rescue mission

All of us who have receive the same transformation are now part of God's church, his kingdom with its new values that overcome the values of this world. You and I are now anointed to help preach good news to the poor, to help proclaim freedom for the prisoners, to help recover sight for the blind, to help release the oppressed and to assure all that the Year of the Lord's favor is now with us. We live in the new kingdom era; the Year of Jubilee is upon us now. In this story, Jesus is beginning in his home town, revealing to them who he really is, and calling them to get on board. His kingdom has come, but will they respond?

At first the hometown crowd marvels at Jesus' gracious words, but they can't get past his role as Joseph's son. They can't or won't see him as the anointed Redeemer and Savior of the world. Their values are not his. They want a political savior, but Jesus comes to give them far more, what they really need. In Matthew and Mark's similar accounts, they both have the hometown crowd taking offense at Jesus and Jesus saying that he could do no miracles there for their lack of faith. And so, the people went against him and even tried to kill him. But Jesus walked away to other places with the same message and goal. As far as we know, he never returned to Nazareth. So, now it's up to us, how will we respond?

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C. How do we help the rescue mission?

I'm thankful for what this church is doing. No, we are not perfect and need to grow more, but thank God that we are part of his rescue mission in this Year or season of the Lord's favor. Thank God for the 21 kids who have come to the Live Free program this week and are receiving love and God's instruction. They are being released from their captivity. Thank God for the many people who keep coming to the food pantry, receiving love, spiritual and physical help. Thank God for the worship times, Bible

studies, meals, Sons of Thunder ministry to troubled young kids, and so much more. Thank God for all those who are working behind the scenes in so many ways. And thank God for each of you and all you do for this rescue mission work right here at Belmont UMC.

Just this past week, Ronnie Cecil called me on the phone. Some of you may remember him as he came here a few years ago with Curtis and helped with some of the Wednesday evening meals. He moved away from this area, but now is moving back soon. He is excited about coming back to church here and bringing his daughter with him and others too. He told me, "You know, I've been to about 15 other churches since I left Belmont and I did not feel comfortable in any of them like I do at Belmont." Wow, what a testimony to this church. Praise God. Keep up the good work Belmont UMC. Ronnie's not the only one who has said something like that. Look for Ronnie in the next few weeks and welcome him back when comes. Keep welcoming all who God sends this way and help release them from captivity.

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Conclusion

Jesus has come! The year of the Lord's favor is upon us! He has inaugurated the mission. Are you a part of it? Ask him to truly rescue you from yourself and then let him use you in his rescue mission.