

“Somebody Knows”

Luke 4:14-21 ¹

My normal pattern is to take my preaching themes in February from African-American Spirituals, and I’m going to continue that this year, but I’m going to begin today rather than in February. The reason for this change is that I will miss being with you on several Sundays in February due to a planned trip to Ghana. Being in Africa is a pretty neat way to observe Black History Month, but it doesn’t help the preaching schedule very much.

The *PowerPoint* backgrounds each week will be art by Timothy Botts, taken from his book, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy*,² and this morning’s spiritual is *Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen*. I expect you have some familiarity with it

Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus.
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Glory, hallelujah!

Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down,
Oh, yes, Lord.
Sometimes I’m almost to the ground,
Oh, yes, Lord.

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Nobody knows my sorrow.
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Glory, Hallelujah.

If you get there before I do,
Oh, yes, Lord!
Tell all a-my friends I’m coming too.
Oh, yes, Lord.

Oh, nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Nobody knows but Jesus.
Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,
Glory, Hallelujah!³

Theologian James Cone, one of the founders of what is now known as “Black Theology,” views a proper understanding of Jesus’ ministry as foundational to the liberation of non-white people from the hydra-headed forms of political, social, economic, and religious oppression to which they have been subjugated. Cone sees Christian faith as just as much a matter of liberation here-and-now as in the afterlife, and he contends that the goal of Black Theology is not “special treatment,” but “freedom and justice. No more, and no less.”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 21, 2018.

² Timothy R. Botts, with reflections by Patrician Raybon, *Bound for Glory: Celebrating the Gift of African American Spirituals through Expressive Calligraphy* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Tyndale House, 2011).

³ Other verses include: *Oh, every day to you I pray . . . For you to drive my sins away . . . ; Although you see me going along so . . . I have my troubles here below . . . ; One day when I was walking along . . . The elements opened, and His love came down . . . ; I never shall forget that day . . . When Jesus washed my sins away*

If you've seen or read *The Shack*,⁴ you'll remember that God the Father appears to Mack, the protagonist, first as a Black woman, and later as an Native American man. The idea is that God appears to us in whatever form helps us move past where we are and deeper into God's love. It is in this same fashion that Cone argues that "Jesus reveals himself as Black in order to disrupt and dismantle white oppression. . . . God is whatever color God needs to be in order to let people know they're not nobodies, they're somebodies!"⁵

Cone frequently refers to Isaiah's words that Jesus read in His hometown synagogue as He began His public ministry: "*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 release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*" (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2).

As we sit here this morning, we're not far from the fiftieth anniversary of Dr. King's martyrdom, and a year or so before that awful day came, Dr. King preached a powerful sermon from this same text at the Cornerstone Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York. Every time I read something Dr. King wrote or preached, I am frankly amazed at the wisdom, power, courage and humility of this modern prophet, and this morning I want to quote quite a lot, really, from that sermon. Dr. King is already well into the sermon as we join him. I've edited what follows to focus on today's theme:

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**Introduction.** I want to mention first that a constructive church sets out to heal the brokenhearted. Broken-heartedness is not a physical condition; it is a condition of physical exhaustion. In confronting the day-to-day problems that go along with our living of life we end up with broken hearts. But probably more than that, the basic reason for a broken heart is the constant experiencing of disappointment.

You know it's difficult to go through life without having to stand amid the chilly winds of disappointment. People are disappointed by various things. This disappointment may grow out of some great hope that we have, some great dream that we have, after we come to that moment when we discover that our hopes have been blasted and our dreams have been shattered. It may come through the disappointment of a love experience. It may come through the disappointment of a broken home. It may come through the disappointment of the loss of a loved one. But whatever it is, it leads to a broken heart.

So many people have broken hearts, and it is the role of the church to deal with the brokenhearted. A doctor can deal with physical ailments, but the doctor can't deal with a broken heart. Pain is one thing, and the doctor can deal with that. But misery is another thing. The doctor can't grapple with misery. Somehow when misery comes into being one must go back to the fountain of the Almighty.

I'm still convinced that the church has the answer to a broken heart. There is a voice still saying, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden." As if to say, *Come unto me all ye that are disappointed. Come unto me all ye who have anxieties floating in your mental sky. Come unto me all ye who are brokenhearted, and I will give you rest.* The church is called to heal the brokenhearted.

**Preaching to the poor.** And there is another guideline in this text, and that is that the church is called preach the gospel to the poor. Poverty is a tragic experience. . . . In the midst of our affluence, in the midst of the fact that we are the wealthiest nation in the world, we suffer from a poverty of the spirit.

<sup>4</sup> William Paul Young, *The Shack: Where Tragedy Confronts Eternity* (Windblown Media, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_theology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_theology)

We've learned to fly in the air like birds. We've learned to swim in the sea like fish. And yet we haven't learned the simple art of living together as brothers.

It seems that I can hear the Master saying to America today, "Even though you've made these gains in science and technology, if you don't make gains in moral and spiritual terms, you are doomed to destruction." Jesus is saying, "You have learned to make of your world a neighborhood, and yet you haven't learned to make of it a brotherhood." He is saying, "You must learn to live together as brothers, or you will all perish together as fools." We are called to preach the gospel to a nation that has a poverty of the spirit.

But not only that. There's a lot of material poverty around. And God didn't intend for his children to live in poverty. We must face the fact—and we as a people know it—that fifty-eight percent of the Negro families of the United States are poverty stricken. And it isn't limited to our own country. It's all over the world. Like a monstrous octopus, poverty spreads its tentacles in villages and hamlets all over this world.

And we in America cannot stand idly by and we cannot be unconcerned. The destiny of the United States is tied up with the destiny of every other nation. I started thinking of the fact that we spend millions of dollars every day to store surplus food. And I said to myself, I know where we can store that food free of charge—in the wrinkled stomachs of the millions of God's children in Asia and Africa and South America and in our own nation who go to bed hungry at night. It may well be that we spend far too much of our national budget establishing military bases around the world rather than bases of genuine concern and understanding. The church is called upon to speak to the world, to speak to the nations.

Some forty million of our brothers and sisters are poverty stricken in this country. Don't have adequate clothing. Don't have adequate food. Don't have adequate housing conditions. Here they are finding themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. And so often these people are unseen. They have become invisible to us.

Old Dives didn't go to hell because he was rich. Dives went to hell because he passed by Lazarus every day and yet he never really saw him. Dives went to hell because he allowed Lazarus to become invisible. Dives went to hell because he allowed the means by which he lived to outdistance the ends for which he lived.

Jesus is still speaking today, saying to his church, "Be concerned about the poor." No matter where you go in life, no matter how high you ascend on the economic ladder, no matter how you ascend on the educational ladder, in that day called judgment day, the great question will not be *How much education did you get?* The great question will not be *How much money did you acquire?* The great question will not be *How much prestige did the world surround you with?* The great question will not be how many honors you received or how many awards you have on your wall. The great question will be *What did you do for others?*

It seems that I can hear a voice saying, "I was hungry, and you fed me not. I was naked, and you clothed me not. I was sick, and you visited me not. I was in prison, and you weren't concerned about me."

**The acceptable year of the Lord.** Finally, "the acceptable year of the Lord." Now that's important: "The acceptable year of the Lord." The acceptable year of the Lord is that year that is acceptable to God, *because it fulfills the demands of his kingdom.* The year of the Lord is not some distant tomorrow, which is beyond history, but the year of the Lord is any year that men decide to do right.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when men will stop lying and cheating.

The acceptable year of the Lord is the year when the United States of America will rely on its moral power, not merely on its military power.

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year when men will beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, and nations will not rise up against nations, neither will they study war anymore.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when men learn to live together as brothers. The acceptable year of the Lord is any year when a nation will allow justice to “roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

The acceptable year of the Lord is any year when politicians will begin to “do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with their God.”

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when men will do unto others as they would have others to do unto themselves.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when the lion and the lamb will lie down together. Every man will sit under his own vine and fig tree, and none shall be afraid.

The acceptable year of the Lord is that year when everybody will recognize that out of one blood God made all men upon the face of the earth.

**God’s guidelines aren’t easy.** These are part of the guidelines, but I don’t want to leave you with any illusions. When you follow God’s guidelines it isn’t always easy. It isn’t easy for a church. It isn’t easy for individuals.

When you go out of here to help the sick, when you go out of here to deal with the brokenhearted, when you go out of here to help the poor, to really preach the acceptable year of the Lord, it isn’t easy. It means suffering and sacrifice. But God wants the church today that will bear the cross. Too many Christians are wearing the cross, and not enough are bearing the cross. Too many churches have a cross sitting at the center, but they aren’t willing to follow the true meaning of the cross.

The cross means what it says. It’s something that you die on. I’m not talking about physical death now. It may mean the death of your prestige. It may mean the death of your popularity. It may mean the death of your budget as it has always stood. But there are too many churches more concerned about a cushion than a cross; more concerned about making the gospel something easy, retranslating the gospel to read, “Go ye into all the world and keep your blood pressure down, and lo, I will make you a well-adjusted personality.” That isn’t God’s church!

Don’t forget that Bethlehem was just a few miles from Calvary. You got to go by Calvary. Good Friday is a fact of life for the church and for all individuals, so don’t be afraid of suffering for what is right. Don’t be afraid of being criticized for what is right. And if you do what I’ve been talking about you’re going to be criticized. You’re going to be scorned.

**It’s dark now, but morning will surely come.** And I want to say to you this afternoon, my brothers and my sisters, that I’m not worried about tomorrow. I don’t know what it holds. But I do know who holds the future, and I know he lives. He’s not dead.

It’s dark now. It’s dismal now. But morning will surely come. The Psalmist talked about it. He says that “weeping may tarry for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.” Oh, my friends, sometimes when we

look at darkness we get disappointed. Our hearts are broken. But I have a message to tell you—that morning will come.

Our slave fore-parents talked about it, and they thought about the midnight surrounding their lives. They would sing, “**Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus.**” But then they started thinking about the fact that morning would come. They started singing, “I’m so glad that troubles don’t last always.” I’m not in despair today because I’m so glad that trouble don’t last always.

Centuries ago, Jeremiah raised the question: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there?” Years later our fore-parents, our slave fore-parents came along. There’s nothing to expect morning after morning but the sizzling heat, the rawhide whip of the overseer, and long rows of cotton, but they did an amazing thing. They took a pessimistic situation and used it as the raw material out of which they molded a creative optimism. They did an amazing thing. They looked back across the years, and they took Jeremiah’s question mark and straightened it into an exclamation point, and they sang, “There **is** a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There **is** a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul.”

I’m not going to fool you. Sometimes I feel discouraged, living every day under the threat of death. Many days in Alabama I felt discouraged. Many days in Mississippi I felt discouraged. Many days in the ghettos of the north I felt discouraged. Many days as I live life I feel discouraged. And there have been times when it was difficult to sleep at night; but I’d go out and sing this song, “Sometimes I feel discouraged and feel my work’s in vain, but then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.”

I’ve seen the lightning flash. I’ve heard the thunder roll. I felt sin’s breakers dashing, trying to conquer my soul. I heard the voice of Jesus promise never to leave me. Never to leave me alone. No, never alone! No, never alone! He promised never leave me, never to leave me alone. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he’s anointed me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach the gospel to the poor, and preach the acceptable year of the Almighty God.*<sup>6</sup>

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Amen, and Amen. Friends, the message from Dr. King, the message from Jeremiah, and the message from today’s spiritual is this: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Nobody knows but Jesus.” And that message, when we see it “right-side up,” is that **SOMEBODY KNOWS.**

Patricia Raybon, who wrote the commentary that accompanies each picture and each spiritual in Timothy Botts’ book, had this to say about “Nobody Knows”:

Why hide
When God knows everything about you
Anyway?
So He understands
Deep hurt
And a bruised body
And the pain of hunger and the sting of sorrow when
Folks betray you and leave you
Alone in the world to die.
And here’s the reason He knows:

⁶ <http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2014/january/guidelines-for-constructive-church.html>

*He's been there, too.*⁷

My friends, sorrow and trouble can break your heart. They can cause you to lose hope. They can lead to loneliness, isolation, and despair. But, my friend, there is Hope, because Somebody Knows what you are going through. Jesus knows. Jesus cares. **Whatever burden you may be carrying today, you can bring it to Jesus.**

I must tell Jesus all of my trials; I cannot bear these burdens alone.
In my distress He kindly will help me; He ever loves and cares for His own.
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! I cannot bear my burdens alone.
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus! Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.⁸

⁷ Botts & Raybon, p. 62.

⁸ "I Must Tell Jesus," words and music by Elisha A. Hoffman.