

C Epiphany 3 1.23.22

Luke 4:14-21

Focus Statement: Today the Gospel has been fulfilled in your hearing.

What would you do if you knew you could not fail?

We start every basketball practice with a question. Some of the questions are silly, some are serious. On Saturday we opened with this question, what would you do if you knew you could not fail? As a disclaimer, I did tell them I had to write a sermon after practice and was trolling them for sermon illustrations, so they were forewarned. So, I asked the question, they thought about it for a moment, then one of the piped up, sort of randomly, "I'd jump off a cliff. I couldn't fail, so I wouldn't die." "You could not fail at dying," another retorted, "so you would die." "Is this about basketball," the one kid who's always totally focused on basketball asked. "About our game Thursday? If I knew I couldn't fail, I'd take the shot." "It's not about basketball, it's about life," said the one who's always super serious about everything. "I'd be president," one of the freshmen piped up out of nowhere. "I'd start a business," said another. "Like an Etsy business?" "No, like a real business, like one to make me a lot of money." "You'd open a business, and get it really successful, and then I'd steal your business." "And then I'd steal your stolen business." And then the conversation dissolved into general silliness, and I told them to go start their warm-up. But what was interesting was, even as they started their warm-up, they continued to talk about the question. What would they do, what risks they would take, if they knew they could not fail?

I started thinking about this question because of how our Gospel text ended today. But before we get to that, let's do some scene setting. We come in this morning at verse fourteen, the very beginning of Jesus' ministry in Galilee. Chapters one and two in Luke's Gospel are about the announcement of Jesus' birth, his birth, and his early life. Chapter three is his baptism by John at the Jordan. Chapter four starts with the same spirit that descended on him at his baptism, leading him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

"Then Jesus," our passage opened this morning, "filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread... He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone." The mission seems to be starting off on a good foot. Or at least with a lot of praise, which one can question if a lot of praise is always a mark of success, but in Luke it seems to be. We will see throughout Luke praise being lifted up as the only appropriate response to the revelation of God through Jesus.

After this quick overview of the early success of Jesus' ministry, the passage takes us to Nazareth, "where he has been brought up," on a Sabbath day, where "he went to the synagogue... as was his custom." Let's paint the scene a little bit. Just over the hills from the Sea of Galilee, first century Nazareth was, to use a modern comparison, a bedroom community of the large, more populous Roman seaside cities. It was where the workers who couldn't afford Roman prices lived. Some scholars have posited that Jesus' family settled in Nazareth because Joseph was a carpenter in one of those larger cities. Actually,

as I think about it, Nazareth was not unlike Post Addition when a lot of you were growing up in it. Working class. A good place to raise a family.

So Jesus went out, spread his wings, did whatever he did between twelve year old Jesus in the Temple and now, was baptized by John in the Jordan, had the spirit descend upon him, was filled with the spirit, met with success, and came back, here, basically, to his home congregation. And like we might do if someone had been to seminary and returned to Trinity for a visit, they asked him to preach. Actually, really, given Jesus' early success and the word starting to spread about him, Jesus hadn't just been at seminary, this would be more like Jesus had released some sort of viral YouTube preaching video—in a wonderful fantasy world where really good preaching goes viral and not, like people falling off curbs, but whatever. So they ask him to preach, and something not unlike what is happening right now happened in that synagogue. He stood up, like I did, to read the appointed reading for the day. By the first century, Judaism already had developed a regular pattern of readings like we have. But here Jesus went off script. He was handed the scroll, but instead of reading where it was opened to, like he was supposed to, he picked a different passage.

The passage Jesus read was from the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. This is after the Babylonian exile. As the returned inhabitants of Judea are picking up the pieces of their shattered lives, the end of the book of Isaiah is all these beautiful and sweeping messages of hope and also challenge to be and live differently, to not fall back into the same mistakes that led to exile. Jesus read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," and let me interject really quick here that Luke has already told us just how literal a statement that is. We know the

Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus, because we just saw the Spirit descend on him at his baptism. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He 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.”

So he read that, he rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant. And here first century worship differs a little bit from ours. I invited you to sit down so I could preach, in the first century, the preacher would stand for the reading and then sit to deliver the message, so that’s what Jesus was doing when he sat down, he was preparing to give the message. And just like you all are looking at me right now, because I’m the one talking, “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.” Jesus had their rapt attention, maybe even more than I have yours, since he’d already proven to be a bit of a wildcard having gone rogue on the assigned scripture. “Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Friends, here’s what’s crazy about that statement. This is the very beginning of Jesus ministry. Outside of the Spirit of the Lord being upon him, he hasn’t done any of those things yet. He hasn’t brought good news to the poor, release to the captives, or recovery of sight to the blind. No oppressed have been made free, no year of the Lord’s favor proclaimed. He’s preached a few sermons, rumors of his powerful teachings have begun to spread, but he hasn’t even called a disciple yet. Jesus is still very much a guy about whom big words were spoken at his birth, some thirty years ago. If we base success on results, Jesus has nothing to show at this point.

But the kingdom of God is a kingdom not of results, but of relationship. When Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," it is true not because the work has been done, but because Jesus is there. The stage is set, the players are ready, and the kingdom of God is ready to unfurl.

On that sabbath two thousand years ago, the scripture was fulfilled in their hearing, and today this scripture is fulfilled in yours. It is fulfilled in yours because Jesus too is here. We meet him in the words of scripture, in the waters of baptism, and in bread and wine shared around this table. These words are real, this promise is true, the captives released, the blind see, the oppressed free, because this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing, just as it was in theirs. And here's the really good news. Think about how much more fulfillment we've gotten to see, gotten to know, than they had. We have the calling of the disciples, so many healings, meals shared, relationships formed, lessons taught. We have the resurrection, the people of Nazareth couldn't have even comprehended that. We have the spreading of the church in Acts, it's survival throughout the Roman Empire. We have monasticism, the Reformation, ways of caring for each other that those first hearers of the promise could not have imagined. They had a local boy speaking big words, we have seen results. And, and, we have still seen only the tiniest fraction of what the kingdom of God will be. Today this scripture has been fulfilled, and also, at the same time, not yet has all that is to be fulfilled emerged. There is still so much more for us to see.

So here's the question this passage raises in us. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in our hearing. Where would you look for Jesus if you knew you would find him there? What risk would you take for the kingdom, if you knew the kingdom would meet you? What mission would you try, if you knew the mission would succeed? What call would you make, what friend would you invite, what thing would you learn, if you knew it would lead to Jesus? Take that risk. Make the gamble. Look for Jesus in unexpected places, share the kingdom in unanticipated ways. It won't work every time—quick spoiler alert for next week—but here's the promise. In Jesus the end is never the end. So today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Share the good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.