

C Lectionary 3 1.26.25

Luke 4:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Focus Statement: Today Jesus' promises have been fulfilled in us.

"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 set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." [Pause]

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Thanks be to God. Amen. [close up book, move to sit down].

No, right. No, that does not feel like a sufficient sermon. Lutheran sermons are not Baptist sermons, we're pretty concise. But even for Lutherans, we'd like more than a single sentence exegesis on a text. Give us something to chew on here, Jesus. And we are not alone in this opinion. We'll find out next week what Jesus' audience thought of this message. But for today, let us dwell on the message itself. Jesus' chosen words from Isaiah, and his declaration that they had been fulfilled in his audience's hearing.

First, some place-setting. This passage takes place at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Two weeks ago, we read about Jesus' baptism by John at the Jordan. Following his baptism, the start of chapter four informs us that "Jesus, [still dripping wet from the waters of the Jordan and] full of the Holy Spirit, returned from Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness." This is the temptation of Jesus story, which we read every year on the first Sunday of Lent, mark your calendars for March 9th. This passage is immediately following that one, where "Jesus, [now] filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a

report about him spread through all the surrounding countryside. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.” In other words, Jesus is starting to become a big deal. The message Jesus was preaching didn’t need Tik Tok to become the talk of the community.

As the news about Jesus spread, “he came to Nazareth, where he was brought up.” And, like one might expect from a famous traveling preacher returning to his home synagogue, he was asked to preach. “He stood up to read” as was the traditional custom of the day. Just like we stand for the Gospel, the reader of the day’s text would stand for the sharing of the word of God. “He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him.” Now, to understand how crazy this next part is, you have to know that first century Judaism already had a three-year lectionary cycle, just like we do. I don’t pick the readings we hear each Sunday. This cycle of readings is set years in advance. I told you earlier we’ll read Luke 4:1-13 on March 9th. I can also tell you that we’ll read this Gospel text again on January 23rd, 2028, and then again on January 26th, 2031. Point is, when they handed Jesus the scroll, what he was supposed to be reading that day was already set. But Jesus, the text makes clear, went rouge. Rather than reading the assigned passage, “He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written...” As an aside, Bishop Satterlee made a big deal in our preaching class about the gift of the lectionary and why we should not do this. But when you’re Jesus, the rules are different. Jesus unrolled the scroll and proceeded to read a collection of passages from Isaiah fifty-eight and sixty-one. Then “he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.” This is exactly the pattern of worship, in first century synagogues, preachers stood to read and sat to preach. Everything Jesus did,

outside of picking his own text, was per custom. So Luke's detailed description of these actions wasn't about the actions themselves. It was about creating space between the reading and the preaching, building our anticipation so that we, like Jesus' own audience, are hanging off his every movement, eyes fixed upon him, waiting for him to explain the selection of this particular passage.

The passages Jesus chose were from what scholars refer to as Third Isaiah. This part of Isaiah addresses the problems the community faced once they returned from exile. The major problem for the prophet, according to theologian Charles L. Aaron, Jr., is that though they are back from exile, "the community remains spiritually sick. Economic and social injustice plague those called to witness as God's people... For whatever reason, some in the community had more money, food and resources than others. Those who had more did not provide for the needs of those who had less... The problems of the community had morphed from oppression by the Babylonians to internal polarization. The Lord saw the problem as serious enough for enough noise to get the people's attention." In this Isaiah passage, the prophet is making that noise, calling people to bring about justice for all.

This call for justice is the passage Jesus chose, yet Jesus took it one step further. Upon reading these words, rather than pontificate on how it was that the people were to be about the work of "bringing good news to the poor, proclaim[ing] release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, set[ting] free those who are oppressed, [and] proclaim[ing] the year of the Lord's favor," Jesus told the people, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And the people must have looked around confused, like, no it hasn't. The

poor are still poor, the captives are still captive, the blind still blind, the oppressed are not free, and I hope this is not what the year of the Lord's favor looks like, because I'm not feeling particularly favored. What do you mean by proclaiming the fulfillment of these words, Jesus?!

His audience must have been perplexed, and maybe disappointed, and I confess sometimes I am too. In the middle of writing this sermon, I took a break to attend a zoom call that the synod hosted so clergy could have a safe space to talk about the anxieties we may be facing as we try to lead our congregations in an increasingly polarized political landscape. How do we proclaim the transformational good news of Jesus Christ in a time when so-called "Christian" nationalism disguises itself in the trappings of religion to deliver a message antithetical to the gospel? Episcopal Bishop Mariann Budde tried, and her sermon led to a member of congress calling for her deportation. There is, as we will see next week, tremendous risk in declaring that, to quote a different line from Isaiah, that the fast God chooses is "to loose the bonds of injustice... to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. To share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your houses." I would love for Isaiah's message to have been fulfilled as Jesus proclaimed, but two-thousand odd years later, and I'm not seeing it here Jesus. Where is the good news when Jesus' words seem to ring empty?

I was reflecting on that question this week, and something occurred to me. There is a difference between finished and fulfilled. From the cross we will hear Jesus say, "It is finished," because on the cross his saving work was completed in the full manifestation of

his glory. But here he says, this scripture has been fulfilled because the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. He was there, as Isaiah had declared, to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. The work was not finished yet because the unfolding of the kingdom of God will not be completed until Christ comes again, but the promise of that completion was fulfilled in Jesus' presence.

It was fulfilled then, and it is fulfilled today because through Christ's death and resurrection, the Spirit of the Lord is now upon us. Because of Jesus bringing the Holy Spirit to us through baptism, we are now the ones called and anointed to bring good news and proclaim God's favor. The scripture fulfilled in Jesus is now fulfilled in us. We don't all have Bishop Budde's opportunity to preach to a sitting President—and I honestly hope I never preach a sermon powerful enough to get picked up by national media, but we all have opportunities in our own lives and circles to speak out for the oppressed, to bring release to the captives, to call for mercy and justice, and to proclaim God's love for all of God's children. Today this scripture is fulfilled in you, dear people of God. You are the anointed ones. Go and share God's love. Amen.