

Our gospel reading for today has Jesus returning to his hometown... going back to where he grew up.

Fresh from his 40-day stint in the wilderness... and filled with the Holy Spirit... Jesus has begun to teach in the area synagogues... and as Luke puts it, he “*was praised by everyone.*”

On the sabbath, Jesus goes to his home synagogue in Nazareth; and as an honored guest (who is gaining a reputation), he is invited to be the *darshanim* for the day—the “speaker” / “teller” designated to read from the scroll and comment on the message of the passage / to offer an interpretation.

And that’s what he does; but the message he delivers is not what the hometown folks expect.

Jesus reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah—some of the most powerful words in all of scripture: “*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.*”

Then he rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down to “teach.”

Everyone is looking at him... waiting for his comment—his interpretation of these well-known words... considered to be a portrait of the long-awaited Messiah.

What will he say? You can almost feel the anticipation / the expectation in the room...

“*Today,*” Jesus says, “*this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

Short and sweet... and to the point.

Probably the shortest “teaching” they have ever heard... and by far the most shocking, too!

Jesus identifies himself as that individual referred to in the reading—the long-awaited Messiah... the one they have been waiting for...

Jesus claims the words of the prophet Isaiah as his own mission statement...

And those of us who know this gospel story *know* how this will end... but you’ll have to come back next week to hear “the rest of the story” (or you can read it on your own, if you so choose ☺).

Suffice it to say, today we are left hanging... here – with Isaiah’s words *and* Jesus’ interpretation / declaration ringing in the air...

And maybe that’s as it should be... maybe that’s helpful for us—to hear only part of the story today... to put ourselves in that gathered assembly for now... to decide how we will hear Jesus’ reading and interpretation...

It is, in many ways, his “inaugural address”—it is the heart of his message / his vision for his ministry... it is his announcement of his mission...

“***Today*** *this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

What did Jesus mean by this?

Did he simply mean that in his very being, Isaiah’s message to share God’s Word of release and grace and healing with all—but especially with those who are most in need—is made manifest? Or is there more?

The word “TODAY” isn’t a static term—it is active and dynamic... as in “TODAY is just the beginning!” And the rest of Jesus’ declaration “*this scripture has been fulfilled*” isn’t the once-and-done present tense...

or the one-time past tense; it is the ongoing, re-occurring *perfect tense*. Which means, I guess, that you could say that what Jesus is saying here is this: “TODAY *this scripture is fulfilled... and will keep being fulfilled... and will keep needing to be fulfilled in your presence.*”

This is important! Because Isaiah’s promises were clearly *not fulfilled* when Jesus spoke these words (or during his ministry)... and they are clearly not fulfilled in our world today, either—NOT if we understand the word “*fulfilled*” in the present or past tense.

But the *perfect tense* encourages us to see Jesus’ words both as a declaration and/or promise—that in Jesus, God acts on behalf of those in need / that God will continue to care about / take the side of the poor and vulnerable and oppressed... *and* as an invitation—that we are called to this same work... we are invited to be part of God’s fulfillment of God’s promises —today... and tomorrow... and the next day... and on...

By emphasizing the word TODAY... Jesus transformed Isaiah’s prophecy into an invitation – for the whole community... for all of us... to work for God’s justice.

Living in God’s promises isn’t about yesterday... and it’s not about waiting for some time in the future—it is about NOW... TODAY!

As the body of Christ, the mission of Jesus *is* our mission. That vocation / that call comes to each of us / all of us in our own baptisms... and it is lifted up again when we affirm our baptism. Hear these words from the Affirmation of Baptism service (ELW, p. 236).

*You have made public profession of your faith. Do you intend to continue in the covenant God made with you in holy baptism:*

- *to live among God’s faithful people,*
- *to hear the word of God and share in the Lord’s supper,*
- *to proclaim the good news of God in Christ through word and deed,*
- *to serve all people, following the example of Jesus,*
- *and to strive for justice and peace in all the earth?*

Each person responds: *I do, and I ask God to help and guide me.*

And then the pastor lays hands on each person and says: *Father in heaven, for Jesus’ sake, stir up in \_\_\_\_\_ the gift of your Holy Spirit; confirm his/her faith, guide his/her life, empower him/her in his/her serving, give him/her patience in suffering, and bring him/her to everlasting life. Amen.*

It kind of sounds like the words of Isaiah, doesn’t it?!

We—each of us / all of us—are called by God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow the example of Jesus in our daily lives... to take on this calling. Just as the Holy Spirit *filled* Jesus with power... and *anointed* him to bring good news to the poor—(which includes the captives, the blind, and the oppressed)... and *sent him out* to proclaim release and recovery and a new beginning to the downtrodden and “broken” and hurting of this world... so the Holy Spirit does for us!

How we accomplish this mission will be different for each of us. As the apostle Paul says so eloquently, everyone can’t be an eye or a foot or an ear... but all parts of the body are indispensable!

Carrying out the mission of Jesus—in word and deed—is not my call alone or yours alone... It is the work of the church – the whole body... together. Paul didn't say, "You are *like* the body of Christ." "*You ARE*..." he said—"You ARE the body of Christ and individually members of it."

We ARE the body of Christ together... and each of us has a part to play... because there is no belonging to the body of Christ without doing our part in the work / mission of the church. This is all made possible through the Holy Spirit – who works in and through each of us.

- How are you living out the promises you made in your Affirmation of Baptism?
- Where can you grow as a disciple / member of Christ's body, the church?
- What gifts do you bring to the body of Christ – to make it stronger in its mission to proclaim good news to those who need to hear it / receive it?

As I was reflecting on these scriptures / writing this sermon... I kept thinking about Howard Thurman's poem – "The Work of Christmas" – (it was on Facebook a lot during the Christmas season).

*When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart."*

[“The Work of Christmas,” p. 23, from **The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations**, Howard Thurman.]

Jesus came to preach good news to the poor... to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, new beginnings to all. As members of the Christ's body—the church—we are called to do the same—NOT tomorrow... NOT next week / next year... NOT “when I have time”... but now... TODAY!

Jesus says, “*TODAY this scripture has been fulfilled!* TODAY this promise has become real! TODAY is a new beginning!”

The word TODAY is an important word in Luke's gospel. It occurs 12 times in Luke—only 9 times in the other gospels combined.

- “*TODAY in the town of David a Savior has been born to you.*”
- “*TODAY you will be with me in paradise.*”
- “*Zacchaeus, come down... I must stay in your house TODAY*”... “*TODAY salvation has come to this house.*”
- And in our reading: “*TODAY this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*”

For Luke, TODAY marks a moment of change... a new beginning...

The shepherds come and see Jesus, the Savior born in Bethlehem... and they return rejoicing and praising God. They are changed!

After Jesus' visit, Zacchaeus is changed! "*Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor,*" he said, "*and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back 4 times the amount.*"

And we can be pretty sure that thief on the cross is radically changed by Jesus' words—he is, after all, promised eternity in paradise.

TODAY marks a time of change brought about by an encounter with Jesus. TODAY calls us to action NOW.

Dear friends, what will we do with these words about good news for the poor, release for the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the year of the Lord's favor?

- How will we let these ancient words show through our own lives?
- Amid the brokenness of the world, how can we become bearers of these words that are so challenging... so needed yet today?

The Spirit continues to send us out to make a difference—TODAY... and every day!