

**Sunday, January 23, 2022**  
**Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)**

Luke 4.14-21

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/388942526335116>

*(Sermon begins at about 17:15)*

**“Fulfillment”**

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is in the early days of his public ministry. He has obviously been engaged in this ministry for at least a little while, as “report[s] about him spread through all the surrounding country . . . and [he] was praised by everyone” (Lk 4.14-15). Even so, what we hear today are the first recorded actions of his public ministry: his teaching and preaching at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. His sermon is short and sweet, just nine words: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Lk 4.21). My sermon, however, will not be so short.

Our Gospel reading opens with a statement that not only sets the stage for Jesus’ time in Nazareth, but also for what will follow—the foundation for his ministry. “Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee” (Lk 4.14). As I noted two weeks ago on the commemoration of his baptism, after he was baptized by John, the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove upon Jesus and a voice from heaven proclaimed, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3.22). In the Gospel according to Luke, the significance of this event is carried into what we hear today: “Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit.” It is further emphasized in the words that Jesus chooses to read from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” (Lk 4.18). That what happened at Jesus’ baptism was an anointing for divine service.

Following his baptism, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil” (Lk 4.1). A period where Jesus is tested, providing him the time he needed to fully embrace and figure out what those words, “you are my Son, the Beloved,” really meant for him. To embrace and figure out what the divine service he was anointed to would look like. No, he probably didn’t have all the answers at the end of the forty days. But at least he had a roadmap. He knew the general direction he was going. Undoubtedly with the assurance of the Holy Spirit that more would be made clear as he lived more fully into who God had anointed him to be.

At the end of the forty days, Jesus comes out of the wilderness, eager to begin his public ministry. We are told that as he returned to Galilee, his home region, he began teaching in synagogues along the way. We are not told any details, likely because these were just convenient stops on the way to his true destination. Home. Nazareth. He is going back to his roots. Not unlike today when public figures choose to begin a new phase in their careers “where it all began.” In this, today’s Gospel reading records what is for all intents and purposes the inaugural event of Jesus’ ministry. His opportunity to make a profound statement about what his public ministry will be about. Proclamation of a personal manifesto for what he

believes and what he will seek to accomplish as he lives out of those beliefs. A statement made not to a bunch of strangers, but to those who have known Jesus all his life. To those who had a role in helping form the person he is today.

Jesus chooses to make this inaugural statement about his ministry through the words of the prophet Isaiah: “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” (Lk 4.18). This was not the passage that happened to be printed out as the lesson for the day. While we are told that the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, Jesus had a choice as to the specific passage to read. And he chose this one. For very significant reasons.

Most obvious, in quoting the words of the prophet Isaiah and following up with “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus is essentially reframing them as his mission statement. Clearly stating what he intends to do through his ministry. To proclaim the good news of God’s love to the poor. Which was not just limited to those who are economically poor. In this context, “the poor” was shorthand for all those who were marginalized by society. The economically disadvantaged, of course. But also, the widowed, the orphaned, those who were pushed to the edges of society because they did not conform to conventional ideas of normalcy.

That he intends to bring liberation to those who are captive, to let the oppressed go free. Not just those who might be in prison. But those who might be imprisoned, even enslaved, by their life’s circumstances. The aforementioned poor and marginalized to be sure. But also, those who might be held captive by disease or infirmity or addiction. Those who might be captive to oppressive, abusive, or exploitative relationships.

That he intends to bring recovery of sight to the blind. Not just those who have lost their physical ability to see. But also, to those who might be perfectly capable of seeing physically, but who are blind to the truth of how God really operates and what God is doing in the world. Blind to the truth of God’s love and grace. Blind to who God created them to be. Blind to how to live more fully into God’s vision for themselves and for all humanity.

All of these entailing to some degree or another an element of healing, be it physical, emotional, or spiritual. And all wrapped up in the proclamation of the year of the Lord’s favor. The ancient concept of jubilee, where what had been lost or stolen would be restored. Where all would be set right and made new. Where everything would be reset to how God intended it to be from the beginning, but which became corrupted over time. Beginning with a clean slate, as it were.

Jesus reading this particular passage from Isaiah and invoking the idea of jubilee would have also sent a very clear message about the overarching theme of Jesus’ ministry. Liberation and restoration. The passage from Isaiah was initially written as an oracle, given by God to Isaiah to be proclaimed to the people of Israel, announcing that the Exile in Babylon was coming to an end. That the people would be returned to their own country and the nation of Israel would be restored to its former glory. Jesus carefully selected this passage to send a message that his

ministry, that his broader purpose, was to bring about liberation and restoration of the people. Liberation from their—from our—sins, resulting in restoration to full relationship with God.

Invoking the words of the prophet Isaiah would have sent a very clear message to Jesus' audience in the synagogue in Nazareth. That what Jesus was intending to do, what was being accomplished by his very existence, would be the fulfillment of ancient prophecies. Would be fulfillment of God's vision for humanity.

This was huge. As one commentator notes: "The idea of Scripture being 'fulfilled' in and through contemporary events was a powerful, widespread notion in Jesus' day. It wasn't merely that these ancient texts were thought to foreshadow the future; it was also that the meaning of present events was thought to be revealed by how they embodied pivotal events described in Scripture." In this way, the present and the past effectively were connected in a special way, revealing something about the other. That past events provided a deeper meaning for what is going on today. And that what happens today can help more fully understand the past. This was due to the understanding that "God typically works through signature poetic patterns; if that's true, our ancestors reasoned, then Scripture and salvation history will rhyme. Ancient motifs will resonate in current events, and important current events will 'fulfill' or 'fill out' ancient motifs."<sup>1</sup>

Given the ancients' understanding of how Scripture worked, of how Scripture and contemporary events are interconnected, Jesus' seemingly simple sermon—"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"—would have been mind-blowing, earth-shattering news. Particularly at a time when the people and the nation lived under the oppression of foreign domination. It would have served as confirmation that God is still active in the world through this man Jesus.

There are times—such as those we are living through right now—when we might be tempted to look at contemporary events as they unfold around us and question where God is in all of this. Just as the ancients would not have—could not have—seen where God was in the midst of the Babylonian Exile or the Roman occupation, or any number of other events at the time, so too, we are not always able to see where God is—if God is—present in the events of our own day. In the midst of a global pandemic. In the midst of ongoing political divisions. In the midst of societal unrest. For that matter, in the midst of whatever personal issues we each are dealing with.

Today's Gospel reminds us that no matter what we are dealing with in our contemporary lives—personally or societally—those themes and motifs are reflected in Scripture. Most notably that God continues to be active. That liberation and salvation do occur. That no matter what happens, there will be good news. There will be release. There will be an end to oppression. Jesus' statement that scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing were not just words spoken 2,000 years ago in the synagogue in Nazareth. Those words continue to ring loud and clear today. As we recognize that we are the poor to whom Jesus proclaims good news. That we are the captives who will be released. That we are the blind who will have our sight recovered. That we are the oppressed who will be freed. That we will experience the year of

the Lord's favor. That is Jesus' promise to us. His promise that, even now, is being fulfilled in our hearing.

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<sup>1</sup> "Jubilee! SALT's Lectionary Commentary for Epiphany Week Three," SALT, January 17, 2022.  
<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/23/jubilee-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-three>.