

Sunday, January 26, 2025
Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year C)

Luke 4.14-21

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1771647343632260>

(Sermon begins at about 25:15)

“Inaugural Address”

As we continue our journey through the season after the Epiphany, we continue to explore various ways in which Jesus is revealed as the Messiah. Up until now, we have heard the iconic stories of Epiphany, which give us a broad brush look at who Jesus is. In the visit of the Magi, we are shown that Jesus is the Messiah for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. In the baptism of Jesus, we are shown that Jesus is in solidarity with us, no matter who we are, no matter what we have done, no matter what we might experience in our lives. And in the changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana, we are shown that Jesus’ ministry is one of extravagance: the extravagance of his love, the extravagance of his grace, and the extravagance of his compassion. Today we move from the 30,000-foot view to ground level. We move to the practical day-to-day implications of Jesus’ public ministry. We begin to get a clearer idea of just how he will live into this role as an extravagant Messiah who is in solidarity with all people.

What we hear today is the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry as portrayed in Luke’s Gospel—a very different start to ministry than the one we heard last week in John’s Gospel. Following his baptism in the Jordan River, in which he hears God’s commission: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Lk 3.22b), Jesus is whisked away to the wilderness, where he spends forty days being tempted and tested. A time for Jesus to figure out just what it means to be God’s Beloved and how that will influence and be manifested in his life and ministry moving forward. In what we heard today, Jesus has returned from this time in the wilderness ready to begin his public ministry. In fact, he has already begun. He had already been teaching in synagogues as he made his way to his hometown of Nazareth. This was the “soft opening” of his ministry, if you will.

It seems that Jesus wants to officially begin his public ministry at the synagogue in Nazareth. In the place where he first learned the Law and what it means to be a child of God; among those who have known him his whole life and helped shape who he has become. Having already developed a reputation as being a rabbi, a teacher, when he goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath, he is offered the opportunity to preach. He chooses a text from the Prophet Isaiah that summarizes his understanding of who he is and what his ministry is meant to be:

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.

He then says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." A bold and powerful statement. Indicating that in proclaiming these words of ancient prophecy, he will be the one to bring them to fulfillment. That prophecy is already being fulfilled in his proclaiming these words. For modern context, what amounts to the blending of an inaugural address and the sermon at the National Prayer Service the day after inauguration. Incorporating Jesus' promise of what he intends to accomplish and laying out his vision for his ministry, all in the context of the foundational principles of faith.

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 elucidated each other."¹ The understanding being that God typically operates through "signature poetic patterns" that we see repeated throughout scripture. Our ancestors reasoned that, that being the case, we will also see these patterns mirrored in current events. "Ancient motifs will resonate in current events, and important current events will 'fulfill' or 'fill out' ancient motifs."² Therefore, in reading this passage, in proclaiming "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus is saying these words should not just be heard as the words of Isaiah from long ago applicable to a people far away. They should also be heard as his own words, applicable in his own time and place. And to us, his followers, to hear these as words that transcend time, continuing to be applicable, continuing to be fulfilled, here and now.

These words from the Prophet Isaiah move from being a statement of hope for the restoration of Israel at the time of the Babylonian Exile to being a statement of promise that, just as Israel was restored to wholeness centuries before, so too through Jesus' ministry will all God's people be restored to wholeness. So, what does fulfillment look like?

First off, the opening words of the Prophet, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor," says two things. First is that Jesus recognizes, and is publicly proclaiming in that synagogue in Nazareth, that he recognizes that God has called him to and anointed him for the work he is about to outline. That this is sacred work. Undoubtedly the result of much reflection during his forty days in the wilderness. And second being that his primary purpose is to "bring good news to the poor." Not just proclaim good news, not just promise good news will come someday, but to actually BRING good news. Not just to say the words, but to put those words into action. To make those words a reality. Particularly to and for the poor.

It is important to understand that when Jesus says this good news is for the poor, he is not just talking about those who are financially poor. In Luke's portrayal of Jesus and his ministry, references to "the poor" are best understood as a broader category: those on the margins. As my favorite study Bible notes, these are "those excluded from social and religious intercourse because of any number or combination of factors, such as those related to gender, age, economic destitution, physical malady, or religious impurity."³ Which, means this good news is

for pretty much everybody, since, in this broader understanding, all are invariably poor or marginalized in one way or another.

Then Jesus, through the words of Isaiah, gets a little more into the specifics of what this means, of what he seeks to accomplish. “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives.” In the original context this was the release of those who were captive in Babylon. But in Jesus’ understanding, “release” has a different, a broader, meaning. In Jesus’ mouth “release” is understood to be forgiveness of sins. As in release from one’s sins. Which is, of course, a major part of what will ultimately be accomplished through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Jesus promises to bring “recovery of sight to the blind.” Here again, more than just implying physical healing. Rather restoring of sight as in opening our eyes to the truth of who we are created and called to be as God’s beloved children. For us Christians, of who we are created and called to be as the Body of Christ. That we are not just mere creations of God, but that we are created and called to be partners, to be co-creators with God in bringing about the Kingdom of God.

And Jesus promises “to let the oppressed go free.” First a recognition that those who are marginalized—again, for whatever reason—inherently experience oppression in some form or fashion. Ranging from self-denigration to oppression by others, and even oppression at the hands of those in authority. Again, in the original context, those in exile in Babylon, and even those who remained in Israel, were oppressed just for being who they were, who they were born to be. So too, through Jesus’ life and ministry, all will be freed from the oppression they experience. All will be welcomed and embraced as siblings in Christ. Returned to the fullness of who they are meant to be. Restored to the fullness of who God creates and calls them to be.

The passage Jesus selects from Isaiah builds to the statement, “to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” “The year of the Lord’s favor” being a reminder of the concept of the Jubilee Year outlined in the book of Leviticus. A time in which enslaved people would be freed, in which all debts would be cancelled, in which land would be returned to its rightful owner. Jesus implying that through him, there would be a time of Jubilee. A new era of liberation, restoration, and return. The idea of Jubilee was not just to lift up the lowly. It was for the benefit of all. Although it would begin for those most in need of this great equalization. Beginning first for the captives, but then extending to all. Beginning first for the disadvantaged, but then extending to all. Beginning first for the vulnerable, but then extending to all. Or in the words of civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer, “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free.” The implication of this concept of Jubilee was that while all would benefit, likewise, all would have their part to play in making it a reality. That it was not about personal redemption or salvation, but about willingness to serve others, especially those most in need.

Today, as we, through scripture, witness the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry, we cannot help but be reminded of another inauguration that occurred the beginning of this week. A very different type of inauguration, with a very different inaugural address. With a very different tone to the actions taken immediately afterwards as the first signs of what this new administration will be about. The juxtaposition could not be more stark. Witness the reaction of the President and his sycophants to Bishop Mariann Budde’s sermon at the National Prayer

Service the day after the inauguration. In her sermon, Bishop Budde addressed the President directly, asking that he have mercy on those who are scared, on those who are marginalized. The very people Jesus speaks to in his inaugural address in today's Gospel. And yet, the Bishop's humble request has been dismissed, even condemned, as inappropriate, as mean-spirited, as political. I guess, in the eyes of our current administration, in the eyes of MAGA acolytes, that makes Jesus' entire message, his entire ministry, inappropriate, mean-spirited, and political. Which, makes our job as Christians all the more challenging. And, all the more necessary.

As I have said multiple times from this pulpit, when it comes to such dichotomies, the choice is clear. By virtue of being Christians, by virtue of our baptisms, by virtue of being members of the Body of Christ, our first priority, above all else, is to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our first priority is to live in accordance with the vision and the mission Jesus laid out 2,000 years ago as he inaugurated his public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth. Just as his reading of the words of the Prophet Isaiah were understood as Jesus making those words his own, so too, as the Body of Christ at this time and in this place, does the proclamation of those words make them our own.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon US,
because he has anointed US
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent US 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.

Today, may this scripture continue to be fulfilled not just in our hearing, but through our own words and actions.

¹ "Jubilee!" SALT's Commentary for Epiphany Week 3. SALT, January 21, 2025.

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/23/jubilee-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-three>.

² Ibid.

³ *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 1860.