

Third Sunday after the Epiphany; January 23, 2022

+ Luke 4:14-21 +

“Today in Our Hearing”

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread throughout all the surrounding area. He was teaching in their synagogues and being honored by everyone.

He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As was his custom, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it is written:

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He sent me to proclaim freedom for the captives
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.**

He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began to tell them, “Today, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

In the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit anointed Jesus with power to do the work that needed to be done to save sinners. And with that power Jesus first went out to the wilderness, where he battled and beat the devil and his temptations. Then he went to Cana, where he turned water into wine to show his power as the Son of God. Next, still in the power of the Spirit, Jesus heads to his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. And there, Jesus does what is his custom: he goes to the synagogue to worship on the Sabbath Day.

There in the synagogue, Jesus stands up to read the appointed Old Testament passages for that particular Sabbath. The synagogues followed the custom of reading assigned lessons on each Sabbath, a custom that carried into the early Christian Church and continues today in liturgical churches like Trinity. The speaker doesn’t pick the lessons, the lessons are assigned and guide the content and theme of the worship. And so the text Jesus is assigned and predictable. But what he says about it is not. The assigned Scriptures that he reads are the words of the prophet Isaiah that he we heard earlier in our own worship service today. Jesus stands up, unrolls the scroll and begins: **The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight for the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.** Then he simply rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the priest, and heads back to his seat.

All of this, so far, the people in the synagogue are expecting. All of this, so far, is very predictable. Every Sabbath day the people gather for worship in the synagogue. Every Saturday someone – usually the priest, but sometimes a well-known guest – reads the appointed reading from the Old Testament for that particular day. And every Sabbath, when he is done, the reader rolls up the scroll, hands it back, and heads back to his seat. Everyone expects that all of that to happen.

What they do not know is going to happen – what has never happened in any one of their Sabbath worship services before – is what happens next.

Word about this particular man has traveled fast to the congregation in this synagogue. No doubt even people up way up here in the North have heard the story of his baptism in the Jordan, and how the Holy Spirit has anointed him with power. Even way up here in Nazareth they have heard the story of him spending forty days and nights alone in the wilderness. And they have heard the story of him turning water into wine. News travels fast when those kinds of things happen, and it explains why they would consider Jesus a significant enough figure to read the lesson on the Sabbath on in the synagogue. And now the people are wondering, as this guest finishes the reading and sits down, exactly who this man is. Is he some kind of magician or sleight-of-hand artist? Does that explain the unexplainable things happening around him, being performed by him? Is he a fraud? Is he a miracle worker? Is he something else?

And that's when Jesus does what has not happened before in this synagogue, and what no doubt surprises everyone in the congregation. After he finishes reading the lesson from the prophet Isaiah and sits down, as every eye in the place locks on him, he says, **"Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."** With those words this new prophet, Jesus, from right there in that town of Nazareth is saying unmistakably: "I am the one. I am the one Isaiah promised to you. I am the one with the Spirit of the Lord on me, anointed with power. I am the one who brings good news to the poor. I am the one who sets the captives free. I give sight to the blind. I relieve those who suffer, and proclaim the favor the Lord. I do it. I am the one God promised through Isaiah to do all those things. Today these words are fulfilled here by me."

In the synagogue that day, Jesus points to himself as the one who is and does everything that God, seven hundred years earlier through Isaiah the prophet, promised the Messiah would be and do.

That same Jesus once said, **"Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there with them."** Here this morning, two or three and a few more than that are gathered together in Christ's name. According to his own promise, he is here with us. So when you hear the story of Christ reading those words in the synagogue and then saying, **"Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"**, you can know this: he is just as much here this morning in our worship as he was in the synagogue of Nazareth. And here this morning he is just as much proclaiming to us that he fulfills those words of Isaiah here and now, in this place, today in our hearing.

Today in our hearing Jesus fulfills the promise to proclaim good news to the poor. To everyone here who realizes that our sin empties us of any value to our heavenly Father – that our sin makes us worth less than worthless to our holy Father – today in our hearing, Jesus says: I bring you poor people good news. I have made you rich again. I have made my holiness your own. I have made my innocent death your own. Those riches are your own. You stand before your heavenly Father clothed in my perfection, holding my cross. These make you rich, because these make you perfect in his sight. Today in our hearing, Jesus brings that good news to us, the poor. In him, we are rich and right with God.

Today in our hearing Jesus proclaims liberty to the captives. To everyone here who realizes that our sin makes us captives – slaves to sin itself, to our enemy the devil, and to death – today, in our hearing, Jesus says: I set you free. I bring your liberty from all your enemies. I overcome and destroy sin for you, I crush Satan for you, and I unwrap the tentacles of death from around your body and soul. This salvation I have won for you truly sets you free for all eternity. Today, in our hearing, Jesus brings this news to us, the captives: In him, we are set free.

Today in our hearing he brings sight for the blind. To everyone here who understands that our transgressions have made us blind – unable to see God, sightless to find the path to heaven – today in our hearing, Jesus says: I bring you sight. Together with my Father, I have sent my Holy Spirit into your heart. There he has worked in spite of your blindness and opened the eyes of your soul by giving you faith in me. Now you see your source of forgiveness and grace; now you see the heavenly Father and the way to his side in heaven. Today, in our hearing, Jesus says this to us, the blind: In him, we see.

Good news for the poor; liberty for the enslaved; sight for blind. This Jesus proclaims today, too, in our hearing. But even Christians who know it and believe it can still feel weighed down – “**oppressed**,” as Jesus put it. We know the good news of forgiveness; we know our freedom from every spiritual enemy; we know that we can now see God and the way to heaven. Even so, the things we’ve done wrong – or the things we should have done but didn’t – can continue to weigh on us. We feel regret and guilt for days, weeks, sometimes years for the sins we’ve committed.

If we don’t feel oppressed by the wrongs we’ve done, it may be something else. We feel weighed down by aging bodies, by fading memories. We have conflicts in our families, disagreements with our friends. How easy it is to start walking through life with our shoulders slouched and our heads down. Guilt is heavy. Life is hard. It weighs.

And so today in our hearing Jesus also announces relief for the oppressed. Whatever sins of the past are still weighing on you, you can unburden yourself at Jesus’ cross. Because there, he paid for them all. Drop your guilt and regret there. Go forward in life without the burden of those sins, with your shoulders up and back instead of weighed down by guilt. Go forward in joy and relief. And relieved from sin’s oppression, sin no more, knowing that in Christ your sins are no more. Today, in our hearing, Jesus says this to us, the oppressed. In him, we have relief.

And today, in our hearing, he proclaims the year of the Lord’s favor. In ancient Israel, the year of the Lord’s favor came every fifty years. Every fifty years slaves were to be freed, debts forgiven, forfeited properties returned to their owners. For the people of Isaiah’s time, the year of the Lord’s favor was every fifty years. But for us, the year of the Lord’s favor is constant. In Christ, freedom for those captive to sin happens every single day. In him, God forgives the debt of sin every day. Christ brings the favor of God that lasts forever. Today, in our hearing, Jesus says this to us: in him, you have the Lord’s constant and everlasting favor.

Sometimes when we sit at home or in church and hear a story from the Bible, we may think “This is a story that happened” – past tense. This story is over with and done. Of course, we understand that the

significance of the story, the application of its truth is for all people, including us today. But the story happened. Past tense. It's over.

Please understand: this is not a story like that. In a very real way, this story of Jesus reading the prophet Isaiah in the temple is still happening among us – present tense, right here and now.

Jesus is just as much among us in this house of worship as he was among them in that house of worship in his hometown two thousand years ago. The words he read from the prophet Isaiah on that day are just as much the Word of God now as they were then. And Jesus' proclamation that he fulfills those words rings just as richly now as they did then. Today, in our hearing Jesus turns us to himself as the one who brings us good news, freedom, sight, relief from sin's oppression, and the favor of the Lord.

When Jesus made that statement in Nazareth's synagogue, the eyes and ears of all locked on him. That's the right way to treat Jesus and these words he spoke. But if you read farther in Luke chapter four, you'll see that the reaction of the people in the synagogue was far from ideal. Instead of believing what Jesus had said, they scorned him and even tried to kill him. Obviously, that's the wrong way to react after listening to what Jesus says today, in our hearing.

The right way to react is this: believe it. Believe what he says today in your hearing: in him is your good news, your sight, your liberation, your relief and favor from the Lord. Believe it and rejoice in it. Rejoice in it by proclaiming that good news to the poor around you who need to hear it. Show that you can now see God and the path to glory by setting your goals and ambitions on Godly things. Show that you are freed from sin by committing it no more. Show your relief from the burden of guilt with joy and gladness. Show that you have the Lord's favor with favor toward others.

Today, in your hearing, these words from Isaiah are fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Hear them, believe them, and rejoice in them. Amen.