

Fulfilling the Scripture...Today
by Rev. Sharon Lee MacArthur
For Berkeley Chinese Community Church
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Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ '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,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.'

²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'



I love the story about the little girl who went to her first day of Sunday School. When she came home with a bunch of papers, she & her mom were leafing through them & they came to a picture of Jesus. Her mother asked, "Do you know who that is?" She said, "Well, I don't know his name, but I do know he goes to our church."

This little girl is just getting to know Jesus! A first encounter with anyone is pretty fuzzy. She and we can both benefit from hearing more stories about Jesus to know him better....



During this season of Epiphany, the baby who was born in the manger on Christmas comes to life for us. We see who this child really is. We see Jesus in many different ways during this season.



Last Sunday, we talked about how he followed his mother's lead at the wedding party in Cana and turned water into wine. He was with family and friends....



Today's gospel story we see another Jesus - he's in the synagogue - a place for teaching and sharing interpretations of scripture. I once thought that the words "temple" and "synagogue" were interchangeable...but a trip to the Holy Land revised my understanding...



Back in Jesus' time, the *temple* was the domain of the priests - where sacrifices were made...where the laws were strictly observed...

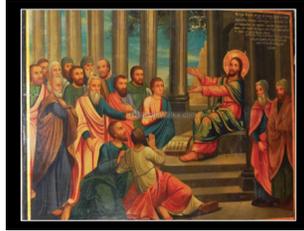


In the *synagogue*, however, - there were no priests, no official person in charge. Each man had an opportunity to participate in the time of reading and learning. Someone would volunteer to read a passage from the scrolls of the Hebrew Scriptures and afterwards sit down and explain what those passages he read meant to him. Our Holy Land guide showed us various sights - the synagogues could be and happen anywhere...these gatherings of people to learn more about scripture together. I got the impression that it was more about a gathering than a building...sort of like the word congregation...rather than "church."

So that's where Jesus is in our Gospel story today – at an ordinary, typical event in ancient Jewish synagogue life. On the Sabbath, a preacher, not a rabbi or some other formal religious authority, but a person known as a *darshanim*, a "speaker" or a "teller" reads from the scroll and

comments on the verses. This preaching style of Jesus' day was widely practiced and expected by congregations--that the speaker would take biblical verses literally out of their textual context--and apply them to the religious, political, and ethical questions around them. Preaching involved making an ancient story, the wisdom of the prophets, alive for the day. Sort of like what we try to do even today!

Excited to see you all –



Jesus was a darshanim in his hometown on this particular day. A synagogue leader handed him the scroll, and Jesus finds the place where the reading last week left off and reads from 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.

Jesus then rolled up the scroll and handed it back to the attendant. All eyes were on him. Every ear was waiting to hear his comment--his interpretation of these ancient words.

Is he going to talk about the Roman occupation? Or the oppression of the empire? or maybe he'll talk about his own ministry – THAT's really gaining attention throughout the region?

Everyone held their breath.
What would Jesus, their neighbor, say?

Jesus could have preached on the wisdom of the old prophet:
He could have said something like "In the past, our fathers and mothers envisioned a world of justice, freedom, and healing. The fullness of abundant life in a land of milk and honey as God covenanted with Moses."

Or he might have elaborated on the world to come by saying, "We are all waiting, along with Isaiah, for the fulfillment of this fabulous promise! One day, the poor will be lifted up, captives set free, and the blind will see! How we pray for that! But it seems so slow in coming."

Jesus could have appealed to his friends' sense of theological nostalgia...He could have talked about *How great Isaiah was!*—

He could have tried to build up their fragile theological hope for a better future by saying things like "*The kingdom of God will come!*"

None of that! Jesus said none of that! He said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The End – the world's shortest commentary...the world's shortest sermon!

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!"

8 words! They were shocked. What do you mean that the Spirit of the Lord is HERE? Now? Today?

What do you mean...That the poor hear good news, that prisoners are being released, the blind see, and the oppressed receive justice? What do you mean...*This* is the year of Lord's favor?

Have you been watching the news, Jesus? Are you not aware of how horrible things are? Where have you been? There is more inequality than ever...there are more people in prison that don't belong there, more illness of all sorts, more violence and terrorism than our ancestors ever knew? What are you talking about? This now? Today? --is the kingdom of God? Are you crazy?

"*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Not yesterday, not tomorrow. Today. That's what Jesus said. And with that word, Jesus' furious neighbors tried to throw him off a cliff! They really didn't want to hear what Jesus was saying! But we are ahead of ourselves...



You know, faith communities are often consumed with memories of the past and hopes for the future. Speaking of the past may take a form of maintaining buildings and structures, of teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from ancestors.



Speaking of the future is often wrapped up in hopes for salvation and eternal life, longings for answered prayers, for the children to hold onto faith or "come back to church."

Both past and future are important to vibrant communities...healthy and life-giving practices of honoring our ancestors AND embracing a hopeful future derived from the witness of the whole biblical tradition.

But both "past" and "future" as the primary location of faith have their shadow sides. Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia--the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future—by overemphasizing the past – we are steeped in grief and fear.

Overemphasizing the future? -- the belief that all that matters is that which is to come—overemphasizing the future often results in thwarted hope, doubt, and anxiety.

A recent survey from Public Religion Research discovered that the majority of churchgoers in the United States express high levels of both nostalgia and anxiety. By strong majorities, religious Americans—both theologically conservative and liberal religious Americans --believe that "our best days are behind us" and that the future of society is bleak.



In particular, mainline Christian congregations are caught between placing a high value on the good old days and a deepening sense of despair that some promised future will never arrive. It seems that most Protestants would rather look back with sadness than trust that a more just and beautiful future is out there.



Anyway – the result is that today is lost. Today is just a place where we mourn the loss of past and fear what we cannot imagine.



But "today" is a pretty dangerous spiritual reality--because today insists that we lay aside our memories AND our dreams to embrace fully NOW. The past romanticizes the work of our ancestors; the future scans the horizons of our descendants and depends upon *them* to fix everything. TODAY places *us* in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that **we** are actors and agents in God's hope for the world. "Today" is the most radical thing Jesus ever said.



Jesus essentially told his friends, "Look around. See the Spirit of God at work, right here. Right now. God is *with us*. Just as the I AM promised our father Moses at the burning bush, 'I will be with you.' This is the sign of God's covenant. The ever active, ever loving, ever liberating, always present God is here with us. **Now.**" NOW – today!!!

In effect, Jesus is asking his friends to open their eyes, to see the burning bush, to become more attentive to God's promise to abide with Israel in the land, and that God is keeping God's promise, no matter how awful the circumstances appear to be.

This is not a call to be quiet and do nothing –

This is not a call to meditate and wait for everything to go away. NO! - Instead, it's a call to see more deeply...to see past the immediate sin...past the injustice and trials...past the evils of human life...past all of it –

It's a call to really see all that...AS well as the profound reality of love and compassion which everything else rests on: The love of God and neighbor.



If we can *see, experience, and grasp* that the active force of love is at work in the world now...amazing things happen...

- our fears are not so overwhelming,
- our hatreds can melt,
- our willingness to murder and kill and seek revenge can recede,
- and we can recognize that in the midst of all things--even in the worst situations--God is with us.

And that transforms fear into compassion, giving us the power to walk in the way of love God intended.

In a very real way, the Spirit was upon Jesus. But it was also upon his friends and neighbors, too. You see, Jesus was one of them. And by emphasizing the word "today," Jesus transformed Isaiah's words, Isaiah's prophecy, into a powerful invitation for the whole community to act on behalf of God's justice. The text might have been read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (and therefore also with you),
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.

Living in God's promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about NOW. This is a hard truth to hear and receive. Jesus' friends refused. They would rather stay stuck in nostalgia and complain about the future. The prophets were so right on - If only a savior would appear and get us out of this mess! But Jesus' sermon remains as clear and poignant and important and urgent as ever:

Today this promise has been fulfilled in your hearing--what we need is here. Today!

So – what is it that we need today?

Call it out – what are the problems of today that Jesus would “fix” if he were here?

OK – THAT’S what Jesus would be proclaiming - Now WE have heard Jesus’ words – We have heard the invitation to Today – will we refuse? Will we try to ride Jesus out of town and off a cliff?

Or will we follow Jesus’ call?



So – are we getting to know Jesus better? Is he becoming less fuzzy? Is he coming into focus? Do we understand that what he declared was more than just words – more than rhetoric? Jesus lived and breathed it all, didn't he?

- Bringing good news to the poor
- Proclaiming release to the captives”,
- recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”
- He lived and breathed it all until his last breath.

But His work continues TODAY – for Jesus is here TODAY - are we not “Christ’s body in the world” TODAY? – is this not also OUR “mission statement” to bring abundant life to the contemporary world? That means TODAY, folks!

As we prepare to consider BCCC’s future – our visions and missions and yes – our budgets and loosening our purse strings for the next settled pastor AND a part time Cantonese speaking pastor AND a part time youth director...look around you TODAY and be guided by Jesus’ shortest sermon...”Today this scripture has been fulfilled...” THAT is how the scripture will be fulfilled...today...



May it be so. Amen.