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Elmer Presbyterian Church
3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Sunday, January 26, 2025
Scripture: Luke 4: 14-21
Sermon: Today Is The Day

In the last two weeks, we've followed Jesus as his ministry is getting underway. We experienced his baptism in which the Holy Spirit surrounded and affirmed him and his messianic identity. We saw him turn water into wine, illuminating his identity as the Holy Bridegroom and prophetic messiah who will inaugurate the fulfillment of God's abundant and extravagant promise and blessings. Now in our scripture for today, we see Jesus formally announcing his mission, God's mission, a proclamation that the time of God's fulfillment had come and that he would be the one to fulfill it!

The passage that Jesus read in the synagogue was from Isaiah 61:1-2. The passage for most people was meant to be a prophetic passage of hope for God's coming restoration of Israel when God would come to bring hope and salvation to all who mourn. It's a powerful passage and Jesus' neighbors, and others who knew him were speechless after his reading.

Jesus wasn't ready to reveal his messianic identity at the time of the Wedding at Cana, but now was ready to fulfill God's prophecy of change that he had come to fulfill the scriptures.

The "speechless" reaction wouldn't last long. Some would be amazed. Others would become angry and indignant. But everyone from this time on would know the name of Jesus! His identity and his mission had now been revealed. But just as throughout scripture God's plans are typically misunderstood by many, so too was Jesus' mission misunderstood.

Luke places this reading in the synagogue here because he wants us to know that Jesus knew, early in His ministry, who He was, and what He came to do. He proclaimed it to all who would hear. Not everybody accepted the message. And we'll find it reflects the response of many to the message of Jesus today. People say today, "Really, you expect me to believe He was the Son of God the Christ?" And many who were familiar

with Jesus in Nazareth that day were offended by his claims and so also, people familiar with Jesus today are offended by His claims, no matter how well-proven they refuse to believe. They prefer to kill Him or ignore him, rather than be held accountable to Him and live their lives in relationship with Him.

Our focus during this season after Epiphany needs to move to the evidence of God's presence through the living power of the Holy Spirit.

Luke has made the Holy Spirit central in the life of Jesus. Luke liked to talk about the Holy Spirit, In fact, Luke referred to the third person of the Trinity more than all the other evangelists combined. The name "Holy Spirit" appears 13 times in Luke's gospel, and 41 times in Acts. Compare that to 5 occurrences in Matthew's gospel, 4 in Mark's, and only three in the Gospel of John.

In this chapter alone, we see Jesus: being filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism, led by the Spirit into the wilderness, returning to Galilee in the power of the Spirit and proclaiming the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy that "the Spirit of the Lord" was upon him.

Clearly, the evidence of the Holy Spirit's work in the life of Jesus was something Luke wanted to be sure his readers would notice.

So why didn't the good people of Nazareth, Jesus' own neighbors, see it?

They were obviously looking for some evidence of God's Spirit. They'd heard the rumors from other towns in the area, especially up in Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee. This Jesus they thought they knew so well, had already gained quite a reputation as a teacher, so it isn't surprising that they give him the scroll to read when he enters the local synagogue.

It was common practice for the teacher of the day to stand while reading the Scripture, then sit down to teach from it, and no one seems surprised when Jesus does this. In fact, they all seem to be eagerly listening to what Jesus might have to say about this ancient prophecy, which most people at that time thought probably referred to the year of Jubilee. The description of Jubilee back in Leviticus 25 sounded very much like "the year of the Lord's favor."

If we look at Isaiah 61 for a moment. The original audience for this prophetic scripture was a group of people who had returned to Jerusalem

after many years in exile. Rather than trusting and obeying God, the nations of Judah and Israel had become entangled in political struggles for power, and they had paid the price.

First Babylon, then Assyria, and finally Persia had overtaken them. Their cities had been destroyed, their temple had been demolished, and their people had been carried away into captivity. Generations had come and gone. Many of them had given up hope of ever seeing the land of Israel.

The remnant that had been left behind represented the poorest of the poor. Eventually, some of the Jewish exiles had been allowed to return to Israel, but those who had come to Jerusalem over the last hundred years or so weren't much better off than the ones who had stayed behind.

The Persian King had ordered the work of rebuilding to begin again, but not much had been accomplished. The temple was still in ruins, and the walls of the once-great city of Jerusalem were piles of broken stone.

Those who traveled from what was now Persia to what had once been Jerusalem were the descendants of Jews who had been taken into captivity centuries before. They had no real memory of the Temple, or of the city itself. All they had to go on were the stories that had been handed down to them. What they found when they arrived in Jerusalem must have been a shock. It didn't match their expectations, by any means.

But then, this prophet Isaiah started proclaiming the word of the Lord, and hope began to rise. Isaiah preached comfort to God's people, and they responded with eagerness to that message.

When Jesus chose this particular passage to read to the people of Nazareth, it was a reminder to all of them to hope again. They were living under Roman oppression, just as their ancestors had lived under oppression from the Babylonians and the Assyrians. They were ready for some good news.

These words have meaning for us now, just as they did for those exiles returning to Jerusalem, and for the people of Nazareth who heard Jesus say, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And just as Christ offers us hope with these words, he also calls us to be the ones who bring good news to the oppressed, who bind up the broken-hearted, who proclaim liberty and release, and who announce the Lord's favor and grace, available to all. Not just in the future, but now. Today is the day.

Luke tells us in verse 20 that the people of Nazareth were listening intently as Jesus sat down to teach. “The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him,” Luke tells us.

Imagine what it might be like to fix our eyes on Jesus! Because when we focus our attention completely on Him, we can also see our place in the world more clearly. Instead of letting our gaze settle on those things that irritate us, anger us, or cause us pain when we ponder them, we would see only Jesus, and the disagreements that divide us would lose their importance.

We would see the ways our lives impact others with greater clarity. When our eyes are fixed on Jesus, we can recognize our part in systems sending out false messages that some people have more value than others, that some people deserve more than others and we can start to do something to change those systems.

We can demonstrate in real and powerful ways that every human being has value and worth to God. When our eyes are fixed on Jesus we engage with Christ in the work of making what’s wrong with the world right. Issues of mercy and justice are no longer just issues we talk about; mercy and justice become real in the person of Jesus Christ, working through us.

This is the season after Epiphany, when Christ is revealed as God among us. As we recognize the Savior’s presence, and fix our eyes and hearts on Him, may we point others toward Jesus and say to them, not “Isn’t this Joseph’s son?” but rather, “Look, let me show you God’s Son. Believe the good news.”

All eyes are fixed on Jesus; the text allows us to sense the anticipation and to feel the need that the people had for good news. We all know this need when the presence of God is felt in the reading of the Word among people who are desperate for a good word. Our world is desperate for Good News!

In that holy silence of verse 20, and verse 21 Jesus says: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” It is all we are given, Jesus the Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, accomplishing all that is necessary to free people from their poverty. Jesus doesn’t just say good things, he is the deliverer, the Messiah, the fulfillment of goodness and love itself.

The church is full of people in poverty, gathered and desperate for a good word. It is also full of the Spirit of God, able to proclaim and enact the good values and ways of the liberating Kingdom of God.

Maybe that's why verse 21 is a bit of a cliff hanger. Because it is the church today that continues to be the fulfillment of Jesus Christ's proclamation and good news sermon, the reason why Jesus uses the perfect tense to describe himself as the fulfillment of the Scripture. May we become more faithful in being the good news.

We love the Lord our God by bringing good news to the poor, by proclaiming release to the captives, by recovering sight to the blind, and by letting the oppressed go free.

These are words from St. Teresa of Avila written in the 16th century:

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless his people.”

Today the Spirit of the Lord is here. Today is the day of anointing. Today is the day to bring good news to the poor. Today is the day to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Today is the day to let the oppressed go free. Today is the day to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

We could also say that today is the day to love, today is the day to tell the truth, today is the day to forgive, today is the day to end racism, today is the day to welcome the stranger, today is the day to feed the hungry, today is the day to reconcile, today is the day to make peace, today is the day to believe that Jesus is our Savior and the Scripture has been fulfilled.