

Today
Luke 4:14-21

Now, this is an interesting story, and I thought about it in a new way as I prepared this week. I have thought before about the hometown boy making good. After I moved here, I learned right away that Frank Waugh, the meteorologist, grew up in this church. When I lived in central Indiana and went to nearby Greenfield, there were statues and memorials dedicated to James Whitcomb Riley, the poet. When I went on a bicycle trip through northern Indiana, I learned about Gene Stratton-Porter, who wrote *Girl of the Limberlost*.

Jesus is starting to make a name for himself. The first two verses of our reading tell us that: *Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.* Here in Nazareth, though, we get the first hint of what Jesus is actually teaching. It encapsulates, for Luke, what is the main thrust of Jesus's entire mission. That's almost certainly what the home-town folks are thinking, too.

“Jesus, the carpenter's son—can you believe it? I wonder what he is teaching that is being praised so much in the villages around here. My cousin's brother-in-law, Jacob, heard him. He was really excited. It's hard to imagine what he is saying that would be so exciting—especially to Jacob. Also, my cousin told me that Jesus had even been healing people in Capernaum. His mother, Mary, said he's coming here to visit soon. That should be interesting.”

So there is definitely a sense of anticipation, here in the synagogue on the Sabbath day. Jesus stands and reads from the scroll 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.”*

He rolls up the scroll, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down. “What is he going to say,” they wonder. “Why was his cousin's brother-in-law so

enthusiastic?” Everyone is waiting, all eyes are on Jesus, waiting to hear what he has to say.

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” Jesus says.

What in the world did that mean? The village of Nazareth is full of poor people. The region of Galilee is full of poor people. The entire nation feels like they are captive and oppressed. Here in the village they don’t have to deal with the Romans directly, but they certainly feel the effects—the tributes and taxes that are imposed on them, the tolls. And the village boys that had gotten so angry and run off with the Zealots. Some of them had even been crucified. What does he mean?—today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!! It does sound nice, he certainly talks well, with gracious words. Honestly, though, what does he mean?

By imagining ourselves there in Nazareth, hearing these words for the first time, I hope that we can also learn a little more about what Jesus is saying to us.

“Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Now, here comes our quick lesson in Greek grammar! The verb “fulfilled” is in the perfect tense, which I believe does not have an exact translation into English. The Scripture has been fulfilled, will be fulfilled, is now being fulfilled right at this moment. It describes an action in the past whose results are still ongoing.

David Lose, a Lutheran pastor, says that we can understand these words as a declaration, a promise, and an invitation. (<http://www.davidlose.net/2019/01/epiphany-3-c-declaration-promise-and-invitation/>) He explains the perfect tense this way: the ongoing, even repetitive, and definitely re-occurring perfect tense. Thus, he says, Jesus is kind of saying, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled and will keep being fulfilled and therefore will keep needing to be fulfilled in your presence.”

Now when we look at the situation in Nazareth, as I’ve already mentioned, the fulfillment of the Scripture was far from obvious. Much as we might wonder, as we look around at all the troubles and all the poverty we still have in this

world, what we would think if Jesus came in to our sanctuary, read those same words from Isaiah and then said to us, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Because, frankly, that is exactly what has happened. Jesus has, indeed, come in to our sanctuary, read those same words to us, and then said to us, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus said, in the Gospel according to Matthew, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name. there I am, in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:25) Or, in the Gospel according to John, he said, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (John 14:23) So we can imagine, then, that Jesus himself has read these same words to us. *“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 read those same words to us, and then said to us, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled and will keep being fulfilled and therefore will keep needing to be fulfilled in your presence.” Then we understand “today” as Today, January 27, 2019. Today, January 27, 2019, this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Our first thoughts probably would be what does he mean, today? What have I missed? What did I forget to look for, what did I forget to notice? Has it really been fulfilled?

And we could come up with examples, certainly, of where we had seen or heard of God at work in the lives of the poor and oppressed in the past. The past, the declaration we could understand. This Scripture has been fulfilled and the results are still in effect. Maybe we would remember the day that the concentration camps were liberated in WWII. Maybe we would remember the day that the Voting Rights act was passed, or the time the Montgomery bus boycott ended and the busses were integrated. Maybe we would remember someone we know who had been freed from the grips of addiction, or who had participated in Thrive

Butler and we could begin to see God at work in those situations. The declaration, the past, we could probably understand, at least on a small scale.

The promise? We can certainly understand the promise. We talk about God's promises all the time. We understand the idea of fallen humankind, the pervasiveness of sin. Even if we don't get real philosophical, we understand the idea of at-risk children—children who have a harder time and more behavior problems because their parents are not able to care for them—whatever the reason. We understand the idea that those kids might be more likely to commit crimes. I have met young men in juvenile prison who were worried about going home, because their own mothers were the ones who taught them to drink and use. So we understand that the many promises of God, “the new heaven and the new earth,” aren't fully realized. We hang on to the hope that God's kingdom will come on earth, it keeps us going during difficult times. We understand the promise for the future.

What about the invitation? “Today, January 27, 2019, this Scripture continues to be fulfilled and will keep being fulfilled and therefore will keep needing to be fulfilled in your presence.” This clues us in to Luke's emphasis throughout the Gospel and the book of Acts. The way. Followers of Jesus are on the way. This is not only a statement of Jesus' mission and purpose. It is the mission he has passed on to his disciples. Today this Scripture continues to be fulfilled in your presence if you continue on the way of discipleship. Today this Scripture will keep being fulfilled in your presence if you continue on the way of discipleship. Today this Scripture will keep needing to be fulfilled in your presence. This is not only a declaration and a promise—it truly is an invitation.

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” (John 14:23) So we can imagine, then, that Jesus himself has, indeed, read these same words to us. *“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 has read these same words to us and then issues us a call—a declaration, a promise, and an invitation. Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Today, we have been called to the way of Jesus Christ. We are in the season of Epiphany, when Jesus is revealed as the Christ. We read of the signs and wonders during his time in human flesh, but now Christ is most frequently revealed in the lives of those he has called his own, those he has called to his way.

"The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

Today we are invited to join in the mission of Jesus Christ, the work of Christmas. It is a tremendous honor, a high calling, a great joy, a privilege, and a responsibility. Any one who has ears, let them hear. You are invited to join Jesus on the Way, to carry on with the work of Christmas.