

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10
Psalm 19
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a
Luke 4:14-21

Epiphany 3C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
January 27, 2019
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Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Did you realize that was the full extent of the sermon? If you were to read on in Luke's gospel, and we will next week, you would realize that this was the entire sermon. First the scripture reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and then this, Jesus' first sermon. Yes, it's one sentence... don't get any ideas...

Let's get ourselves settled in the story. Before we veered off into John's gospel last week, we heard the story of Jesus' first public appearance when he was baptized in the river Jordan. We didn't really hear from Jesus at his baptism, instead his actions spoke for him that day. He had been filled with the Holy Spirit in his baptism and the Spirit, we're told, led him into the wilderness where he would do battle with the devil for 40 days and 40 nights. All that time he fasted and gave himself wholly to the work. And still, when finally the devil departed from him, Jesus didn't collapse in a heap of exhaustion or go to a quiet place to rest and pray. *Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee...* and that is where we pick up today.

Jesus went from his baptism to besting the devil in the wilderness and then straight back to Galilee to begin his work. When he finally arrived in his hometown of Nazareth, he returned to the synagogue where he'd studied as a boy and was given the high honor of reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and instructing the people in the scriptures. He knew exactly what he wanted to read. He knew what his first words were to be – he was filled with God's Holy Spirit just as he had been when the devil couldn't get the best of him in the wilderness. And because he was filled with God's Holy Spirit he read

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And then he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the acolyte and sat down to give his sermon. Yes, the one that consisted of one sentence. *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing...* There was no expository on the scripture, no placing people in the story, no background or application to the day. Just the pronouncement of freedom, forgiveness and God's favor, all right there in front of them that very day. Because of Jesus, Isaiah's dream came true and God's future was born that very day. *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* Yes. Today.

There is a lot ABOUT scripture in our scripture readings today and that is important to notice. When the priest Ezra stood at the gates of the town square to read from Torah, the people wept, and not because the priest had been reading to them for hours on end. They wept because it was the first time the holy scriptures had been read aloud since their return from the exile in Babylon. They were so grateful to be home, so grateful to hear the Word of God in holy scripture once again. We know that feeling, don't we? When something precious to us has been lost, when we feel as though we will never

again know love or joy or even peace and then we do, our hearts are so filled with gratitude that there is nothing to do but laugh and weep and pray and praise. This is how precious the Word of God was to God's people those hundreds of years ago. Hundreds of years before Jesus, Isaiah and Ezra and countless others brought God's good news to the poor by bringing them the Word of God and helping them to make meaning out of God's promises. God sent Ezra and Isaiah and Nehemiah and so many others 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. And when God sent Jesus, the Word made flesh, those were the first words he preached.

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When we come together in Christian community, we gather around scripture. And we do that because scripture, the divinely inspired written Word, is one of the very important ways we come to know God. So important in fact, that in today's reading from Luke we get everything Luke wants us to know. That Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Word of God who came to dwell among us, came to proclaim and to usher in God's vision of heaven right here on earth. And all that is made known to us in scripture.

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This was Jesus' mission on earth. It was, and is, God's vision for us all. And because that is so, it is our mission too, and that can be tricky. You see, good news for the poor is necessarily going to mean not-so-good news for some of the not-poor. In theory, every good Christian would want to help the poor, right? Jesus was always standing up for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, and as our pattern for living that would necessarily mean we would too. But that isn't always easy. It seems simple but it's actually pretty complicated. We're sometimes judgmental about people in dire circumstances. We sometimes blame them for the situations they're in, assuming they could pick themselves up by their bootstraps if only they would. We forget that they have no boots and so bootstrap picking up is not an option. We forget that societal structures work against them and serve to reinforce their marginalized status. We forget that taking care of everyone, cherishing everyone, providing for everyone is what God asks of us.

"Impossible" you might say, and maybe it is. But that is not our concern. This is God's mission and we can leave the outcome to God. Ours is to have ears to hear, to be so moved by God's Word that we cannot help but take action, to do our part as individuals and as a church community to ensure that Today this scripture is fulfilled in OUR hearing.

When Jesus read the prophet Isaiah's words some two thousand years ago, societal circumstances were certainly no better than our own. The occupying government wasn't focused on caring for the occupied, it was focused on the occupation and on maintaining its power over the occupied people.

But the external circumstances Jesus was born in to didn't seem to have much impact on the words he chose to speak and the things he chose to teach. His work was to make plain Gods mission, a total reversal of the powers that be, a world in which justice for all matters much more than comfort for some.

The year of the Lord's favor Isaiah spoke of and Jesus preached? That was what happened once every 50 years. It was called the Jubilee year, the year of the Lord's favor and mercy, the year all debts were forgiven so that no one could be permanently ruined by the circumstances of their lives. Can you imagine how different life would be for people in our time if such a possibility existed? It seems that mercy is necessary if real justice is to prevail. Not the kind of justice that says "you get what you deserve," but the kind of justice that says "all of God's beloved children are cherished and provided for." When we give our lives to working for true justice for all people, the scripture is indeed fulfilled in our hearing.

After church today, we will gather together to celebrate the year gone by and look forward to the year ahead. We will elect a new vestry class that will join with current vestry members to lead us through a new understanding of our own mission as the particular iteration of the Body of Christ that is St Barnabas Episcopal Church on Bainbridge Island. I used to be surprised by the ways the lectionary readings seemed to "work" with the important issues of the day. I am no longer surprised by that, simply delighted in this gift of the Holy Spirit. To be offered God's vision of the Kingdom come among us on the very day we gather to share our gifts, to take our place in the councils of the church, to be reminded that we are one body with many parts, each of which can only fully express itself as part of the whole... well, it just doesn't get any better than that. This community is alive with God's Holy Spirit, and I believe with my whole heart that God has great plans for us, plans that will help God's kingdom come among us not just in this place but far beyond our church walls and even beyond our island. There is good work to be done and I am so grateful to be doing God's good work with you.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon [you] because God has anointed [you] to bring good news to the poor. He has sent [you] 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. Amen