

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
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Anointed

Last week we heard the story of the wedding at Cana – Jesus’ first public act of ministry in John’s gospel. Today, we hear Luke’s version of Jesus’ first public act of ministry – reading from the prophet Isaiah and preaching his first sermon. Yes, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” was his very first sermon. And yes, it was only one sentence. But don’t get any ideas about that..

We’ve missed something very important this year because we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany on the Sunday following Epiphany when we usually celebrate the Baptism of our Lord. That’s the day Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan and was immediately driven into the desert wilderness where he was tempted by the devil for 40 days and 40 nights. That story is foundational to everything that comes after it because it shows us what Jesus – who had been filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism - could be and could do. It shows us what we could be and could do too.

For forty long days Jesus was in the desert wilderness fasting and praying and giving himself wholly to the work he’d been given to do. 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, 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 holy 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 and so he said, *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.*

And then he rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the acolyte and sat down to give his sermon, the sermon that consisted of one sentence. *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.* There was elucidation of the scripture, no placing people in the story, no explaining how different the culture was 700 years before. 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. Because of Jesus, God’s future is born this very day too. The prophet Isaiah’s words ring as true today as they did 2,000 years ago and even 2,700 years ago. That is the beauty of scripture – while it may be interpreted

differently in different times or based on newly discovered information - scripture remains meaningful across all time.

There is a lot about scripture in our 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 it seemed the priest would be 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, that it made them weep. We know that feeling, don't we? When something precious has been lost - whether that is a person or a dream or a way of life or even being able to worship together - when something precious has been lost and we feel as though we will never find it again, and then we do find it again, 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 thousands 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 see and to hear and to live into God's promises. God sent Ezra and Isaiah and Nehemiah and so many others to proclaim God's goodness and favor, and then God sent Jesus, God's most beautiful Word, to proclaim God's goodness and favor too. *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.*

This was, and is, God's vision for us all. It was Jesus' mission on earth, and because that is so, it is our mission too, and that can be tricky. You see, good news for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized is necessarily going to mean not-so-good news for some of the not so poor or oppressed or marginalized. In theory, every good Christian would want to help these people, 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. 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 try. 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, regardless of how they look or how they act 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. Our job is to be sure we have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts cracked open, so we will 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 Jesus chose as his very first Word... 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, 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, the things he chose to teach or the way he chose to live. His work was to make plain God's 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 was essential to that justice and mercy. It happened once every 50 years and 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 fulfilled in our hearing, by our doing.

Not long ago, the leaders of St Barnabas asked all of you what you heard God calling us into, and you told us that we are called to Love, Seek and Serve. To love God, God's people, and creation, to seek a deeper knowledge and experience of God through prayer, scripture, study, and worship and to serve God, our community, our island community and the wider world through acts of justice and mercy, by giving of ourselves and our resources, and by developing and deepening relationships with people unlike ourselves.

Do you see how resonant that is with what Jesus read from the ancient Hebrew scriptures? *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.* Yes, Jesus was anointed to do all those things... and apparently you all think we have been too. And if we listen to the apostle Paul, we know the importance of every single member of the Body of Christ, and the reality that the Body cannot be whole until every member takes his place, until every member shares her gifts. We cannot do what God calls us to do, we cannot Love, Seek and Serve without every single one of us taking our place, doing what God has anointed us to do.

So...what has God anointed you to be and to do?

I'd like to invite you to take this next week to pray and reflect on the ways God is calling you to Love, Seek and Serve as part of our St Barnabas community. *The Spirit of the Lord is upon you because God has anointed you to bring good news to the poor. God 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.*

How is God calling you to do just that? God is calling. I wonder how we'll respond. Amen.