

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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Last week we heard the story of the wedding at Cana – Jesus’ first public act of ministry and the first miraculous sign in John’s gospel. Today, we hear Jesus’ first public act of ministry in Luke’s gospel – reading from the prophet Isaiah and preaching his very first sermon. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Did you realize that was the full text of the sermon? If you were to read on in Luke’s gospel, you would realize that the one sentence was it. Yes, it might have been the best sermon ever preached. And yes, it was one sentence... and no, you shouldn’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 actually 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 did battle with the devil for 40 days and 40 nights. All that time he fasted and gave himself wholly to the work. I think it’s quite extraordinary that when the devil finally departed from Jesus, finally left him to his own devices, 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...” which 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 public 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 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 in the wilderness. And filled with God’s Holy Spirit he read,

*... 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...*

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 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, not at some future time, but on that very day. *TODAY*, Jesus said, *this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*. 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 they knew 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 Babylon where they had been exiled for seventy long years. They were so grateful to be home and so grateful to be able to hear God's word spoken to them through the holy scriptures. We know that feeling, don't we? When something precious has been lost and we feel as though we will never find it again - whether that is a person or a dream or a way of life –... 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. And to remember, so that we don't take anything that matters, for granted.

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 people 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. 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, oppressed or marginalized. In theory, every good Christian wants to help people on the margins, right? Jesus was always standing up for the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized, and because he is our pattern for living, that necessarily means we would too. But it 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 the scripture is fulfilled in OUR hearing.*

When Jesus read the prophet Isaiah's words some two thousand years ago, societal circumstances were in some ways like 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 proclaim God's mission, and to live out the total reversal of the powers that be, to live into a world in which justice for all matters much more than comfort for some. 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, and by our doing.

One of the things that will happen when we gather for our Annual Meeting this afternoon, will be the opportunity to begin reflecting on our time together, about what has been done and left undone, about what wants to be carried forward and what wants to be left behind. This will be the first of several conversations meant to help you articulate the wonderful and particular ways you, the St Barnabas community, are the Body of Christ, to begin to wonder together about what God is calling you into as you move into a new season, and ultimately to begin to contemplate the qualities in a pastor and priest that will best serve this community and the work God calls you to. The last time we had such conversations, they ultimately led to articulating your call to Love, Seek and Serve. I look forward to the discovery that will happen for all of us as we begin this conversation at this particular moment in the life of St Barnabas. Whatever we discover, I know it will be resonant 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 we have been too. The Spirit of the Lord is upon US, 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 her place, until every member shares his gifts, until each of us takes our place and does 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 begin to pray and to wonder each day, about the ways God is calling the St Barnabas community to move into this next season. You have everything you need to grow ever more deeply into your lives in Christ, your lives with each other, and your life in the wider world as the Body of Christ that is St Barnabas. *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 that? God is calling. I can't wait to see how you'll respond. Amen.