

“Life Fulfilled” GPPC 1-27-19
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Luke 4:14-21

The Spirit of God had been busy.

First, in chapter three of Luke’s gospel, Jesus was baptized; and the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove, and God’s voice proclaimed Jesus as beloved servant and Son of God.

Then, at the beginning of chapter four, the same Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for 40 days. This was a testing that focused especially on the identity of Jesus and his purpose.

And finally this morning Luke says, “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.” So the Spirit caused Jesus to travel and to teach. And, at least for a little while, his student evaluation scores and ratemyprofessorandlord.com reviews were off the charts. The offer of tenure appeared to be a distinct possibility.

Jesus even went back to Nazareth, the town where he’d grown up, been taught the faith, and became a man, now thirty years old. Luke

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says, “He went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, *as was his custom.*”

In other words, even Jesus showed up for worship on a regular basis. His parents had kept their religious vows, and he’d been raised in the worship, education, and mission of that faith community. So he knew how to worship, and he knew the Bible, and he knew the people of faith with all of their goodness and all of their messiness. The Spirit had been busy.

So Luke says Jesus stood up to read (just as we still stand up to read scripture in worship 2000 years later). And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. He unrolled it and found a passage. Scholars don’t know whether this was the assigned passage from Isaiah for that sabbath day (sort of like the way we use a lectionary list of suggested passages for Sundays) or Jesus went and found the passage on his own. We just know that of all the passages in the Bible on practically any topic *this* was the passage he read. This is the passage that Luke records for us. And of all the words Jesus could have said on any topic, *these* are his first public words in Luke’s gospel. These words function as a kind

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of inaugural address that lays out who Jesus is, what his priorities will be, and what he will do.

He says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Notice Jesus said God “anointed me.” He was quoting from Isaiah, and as one Bible scholar says, “‘anointed me’ means ‘made me the Christ or Messiah.’...God’s servant who will bring to reality the longing and the hope of the poor, the oppressed, and the imprisoned. The Christ will also usher in the amnesty, the liberation, and the restoration associated with the proclamation of the year of jubilee. (v.19; Lev. 25:8-12).” (Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, 62.) That’s what Jesus claimed.

Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it back to the attendant, and sat down. Luke says everybody was staring at him. And Jesus said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Mic drop. Not exactly what they were expecting.

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And at first his listeners were pleased. But then if you read further in the chapter, you'll see their mood quickly changed as Jesus challenged their ideas about the exclusiveness of God's love for them alone. So they drove Jesus out of town and planned to murder him by throwing him off a cliff. But he managed to slip away from the posse. Not to worry, he would be murdered later on by the Romans with a cross.

The lesson is clear enough, isn't it? If you want to make people mad, furious even, talk about God's mercy, justice, and love for *all* people.

But for this morning, we go back and focus on the first public words that Jesus spoke in Luke's gospel. The words were indeed taken from the prophet Isaiah, from what's call the Septuagint, a later Greek translation of the original Hebrew. Jesus mainly quoted from Isaiah 61, but he left out a line there about "the day of vengeance of our God." And he added a line "to let the oppressed go free."

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So how might we summarize what Jesus said? Jesus said he was sent and empowered by the Holy Spirit to relieve human misery and replace it with wholeness and flourishing.

Jesus covered several categories of human misery—poverty, captivity (probably actual prisoners in jail), blindness (probably physical, spiritual, and intellectual), the oppressed (people whose rights were denied or who were mistreated), and finally to “proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” As one scholar explains about “the year of the Lord’s favor,” “Every fifty years, the fields rested and were reinvigorated for future harvests. In this jubilee year, debts were forgiven. People returned home. Slaves were set free. Some scholars speculate that the very year that Jesus appears in the Nazareth synagogue may have been the year of jubilee, around 26-27 [A.D.]...No wonder the crowd is stunned (v. 20).” (Linda McKinnish Bridges in *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 1*, 289.)

Can you imagine doing this today? “Sir/Madam, I’m calling from MasterCard just to remind you that it’s a jubilee year and your credit card balance is now zero. Have a nice day!”

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You can't do that. Our whole financial system is built on debt and debtors, interest rates, accumulated wealth. You can't do that, Jesus!

Or think about captives. Our country abolished slavery in the U.S. back in 1865. Other countries followed suit. However, thanks to various kinds of modern-day slavery and human trafficking experts estimate there may be 30 or 40 million people enslaved around the world right now.

You may have also seen in the news this report that the 26 richest people in the world (all of them billionaires) are worth 1.4 trillion dollars, as much as the 3.8 billion poorest people in the world. And the gap is widening. Lots of poor people.

And there are plenty of people who are blind (physically, spiritually, and intellectually).

And lots of captives, especially in the United States. We have 2.2 million people behind bars, more than any other nation on the earth, many of them there for nonviolent crimes, often for petty drug offenses with harsher penalties applied to African-Americans. And the prison population is growing.

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We also have folks whose rights are denied, people who are oppressed because of their race, gender, age, sexual orientation, economic status, and other reasons.

But Jesus sat down and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

How so?

In Jesus, the promises of scripture, the hopes of the ages, have been fulfilled. With his coming, the end of human suffering and misery is being unveiled. God’s intention for life in all its abundance is being revealed. In Jesus’ resurrected presence, suffering, evil, and death are no more.

So today this scripture is fulfilled. Today, life itself is fulfilled. And we, the church, members of the Body of Christ, are chosen by God and empowered by the Spirit to be a part, maybe just a small part, of this fulfillment that is dawning.

A pastor says, “Early in my work as a pastor, I visited a death-row inmate convicted of killing a teenage girl. At the time of my visit he had been awaiting his execution for twenty-one years. When we spoke, he

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talked about grace incessantly. Eventually I asked him if his sense of grace had overwhelmed his sense of guilt. He said, ‘The gospel requires us not simply to be sorry, but to be transformed by our sorrow. For me, this is a daily transformation.’” ...“He said, ‘I will never forget my crime. But there has to come a point where you receive forgiveness and then forgive yourself. Not to justify your actions, but to accept God’s love...It does not matter where you are. It is who you are that matters. I am a person who is loved and forgiven by God.’ Then he rattled the chains that tied his wrists together dismissively. As if they did not matter.” (Matt Fitzgerald in *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol. 1*, 101 and 103.)

It does not matter where you are. It is *who* you are that matters.

We are a forgiven people, an empowered people, and a people daily given the opportunity to be a part of what Jesus promised in his inaugural address—the ending of human misery and the fulfillment of God’s intention for life.

What human need might God be empowering you to address *today*? What ministries of fairness and compassion could God be calling our church to take on *today*? As disciples of Christ, we have this

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amazing opportunity, this remarkable privilege. Good news to the poor.

Release to the captives. Recovery of sight to the blind. Letting the

oppressed go free. The year of the Lord's favor. Today, this has been

fulfilled. Today. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal