



The Third Sunday after Epiphany
January 23, 2022

“Beginnings”

Pastor Kirk Kerns

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Let us pray: Faithful God, you sent your incarnate Word as the sun of justice to shine upon all the world. Open our eyes to see your gracious hand in all your works, that, rejoicing in your whole creation, we may learn to serve you with gladness, for the sake of him through whom all things were made, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

During the Epiphany season, we find ourselves reading about the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. Last week it was from the gospel of John and the turning the water into wine and now in Luke we have Jesus’ first public act which in reality is more of a sermon than an act. Each gospel writer records Jesus’ beginnings as they have heard about them.

The Holy Spirit is a major actor in the gospel of Luke and today our passage begins by stating that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit. The previous chapters in Luke have spoken about Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descends

upon Jesus at his baptism then leads him into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for 40 days and nights. Filled with the power of the Spirit, Jesus returns to his home country of Galilee and begins his public ministry. Today we read that “He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.” Well, next week’s gospel will put a damper on this praise but that’s another Sunday’s reading.

If you could choose the words that might encapsulate who you are, the only words that would communicate the essence of yourself, your life, your commitments, what would they be? When it comes to our gospel for today, Jesus reading from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah gives us the words that tell us who Jesus is. Jesus’ brief reading says quite a bit about who he is and what he represents. Jesus opens the scroll and finds the place that tells us what we need to know about him. Listen to the words from Isaiah and pay attention to the amount of time it takes to read them. “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.”

It only took between 10 and 15 seconds to read. I wonder what our story would say about us and how long would it take to express who we are. Well we

know Jesus had some help reading from the prophet Isaiah but it is short and to the point. Our gospel ends today with Jesus' acknowledgement, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The presence of Jesus at this point gives us much food for thought as we find ourselves in the midst of the Epiphany season which means revelation or the revealing of someone and in this case it is Jesus. This passage read and heard in the season of Epiphany has a major role because of what it reveals about who Jesus is, what Jesus will do, and for whom Jesus has come. Are we able to share or reveal exactly who we are? I know it is Jesus, but still, these are bold words. You want to know who I am and why I am here? Well, here you go, and no "euphemistic, metaphorical, or figurative hermeneutical gymnastics allowed" according to Karoline Lewis in her commentary. What if Jesus really means what he says because it says who he is.

The words of Jesus are not just important for what they say but also because of their source. The origin of these words is important and deserves the attention it gets. Jesus isn't just making this stuff up. Jesus situates his ministry in the ongoing promise and commitment of God, to the lowliest of God's servants, to those who fear God from generation to generation, to the hungry, to God's people Israel, to Abraham and Sarah. The promise and prophecy of Isaiah

provides the theological trajectory that Jesus will articulate and embody in the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus' words are a call to real life, real people, and real time. This is God in our present and in our reality. This reality is now in our laps, so to speak. We are continually challenged by how we respond to the poor with the good news that they are loved. How do we proclaim release to the captives and recover of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free? Do we look at Jesus' words and pursue them in our lives? We may not have the ability to actually return sight to someone who is blind but are we able to open someone's eyes to the gospel story of our Lord who came to save them and us from our sinful ways?

The word translated "poor" from the Greek has to do with economic status as well as other factors that lowered one's status in the first-century world. The factors such as gender, genealogy, education, occupation, sickness, disability, and degree of religious purity are at the heart of Jesus' ministry. Jesus' mission is directed to the poor in the holistic sense of those who for various reasons are relegated to the margins of society. Jesus refuses to recognize these social determined boundaries, insisting that these very "outsiders" are the special objects of God's grace and mercy.

Jesus proclaims the “year of the Lord’s favor” that is probably a reference to the year of Jubilee commanded in Leviticus 25, a year in which indentured servants and even resident aliens were to be released, debts were to be forgiven, and land and property returned to families who had leased or sold them. It was to be a year of radical restoration, but there is little evidence that it was ever practiced in Israel. It was instead projected into the future as an eschatological hope.

There is a strong political debate going on in our country right now. People are divided about what the government is saying and has said in the past about student loans, child care, voters rights, the poor, vaccines, tests for Covid, and the economy to name a few. There seems to be more jobs available right now than workers to fill them. Of course this is all just things that are part of the public debate. I wonder where Jesus comes down on these issues. You can read Jesus’ words and make your own determination but make sure you read them with the understanding of Jesus’ final words in our gospel for today, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

As I read the gospel over and over again this past week, I had to wonder if Jesus’ words are heard in the context of his time only by modern readers and hearers or do we have a sense that Jesus is talking to us and to all people

throughout the ages. What Jesus says will provoke a strong response among many who hear these words today if they truly consider that they are directed to all of us. Good news to the poor and the “year of the Lord’s favor” sound great until we get into the nitty-gritty of what that means. The idea of a radical redistribution of property and wealth, for example, will not sound like good news to many of us who live comfortable lives and do not want to give up what we have. The idea of welcoming certain groups of people into our communities will be unsettling for some. Still Jesus proclaims that today this scripture is fulfilled in him. Projecting this vision into a distant future is no longer possible.

Jesus will demonstrate this fulfillment concretely in his acts of healing, liberation, and welcome for all kinds of outsiders-demon possessed, the sick and paralyzed, lepers, hemorrhaging women, tax collectors and sinners. Jesus’ mother, Mary, has already announced that God is up to some serious table-turning, and Jesus will have much more to say in Luke’s Gospel about wealth and status and the reversals God’s reign brings about.

You know that Jesus’ words from Isaiah will challenge us in different ways. Because while it is certainly true that the vision laid out by Jesus here is for a world which is shaped by God’s love in a way which is too often not reflected in

the world which is before our eyes, even so the gifts envisioned here are surely meant for all of us.

Jesus' words spoken those many years ago now are still very relevant for us today. They challenge us but for Jesus they were who he was and who he had come to serve. How many times have we seen or experienced someone who is seeking help? How many times have we helped them?

Now I am not saying that each one of us should give up all you have and give it away but I think and I believe that Jesus is telling each one of us not to forget those who may not find themselves in our situations and who are seeking some relief.

Today we are told in Luke that Jesus was praised by everyone. After Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah and sits down, we hear that the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Jesus. Is there room for praise for our Lord even after hearing his words today? I wonder about people's eyes today including our eyes as to where they are fixed. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord, the hymn "Be thou my vision" asks that you be just that, our vision. Let us see as you see and guide us in our actions after we see as you see. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.