

Sermon on Luke 4:14-21  
Third Sunday of the Epiphany, January 27, 2019  
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer  
By James Erlandson

There's an old saying that says, "*When the wedding party is over, and the guests have gone home, the real work of marriage begins.*" Has anyone heard that before? Those of you who are married, or whoever made a similar commitment to another person, know that this is true. When the party's over, the clean-up begins. After the graduation ceremony, then the work begins, and so on.

We have just come off a two-week celebration of the birth of Jesus, adding to it the celebration of a New Year beginning, the Epiphany of our Lord (in the visit of wise men from the East), then the Baptism of Our Lord in the Jordan and his first "miracle", when Jesus changed water into wine at the Wedding in Cana. We've had lots of celebrations, and announcements of the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, our Savior, proclaimed by Christians as the Messiah promised by God. Now it's time to get to work. On the second Sunday of Christmas I read the famous poem by Black Theologian Howard Thurman, "The Work of Christmas": *When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, When the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.*

So today we have heard the scripture Jesus read upon his return to Nazareth, his hometown, to teach in the synagogue after spending 40 days in the wilderness, preparing for his mission from God. The reading he chose was from the prophet Isaiah, a promise delivered to exiles and the oppressed in Israel. We heard it today. You might call it Jesus' "mission statement from God" – a text which is posted on the walls of many seminaries of the Church, as a message to preachers of the Word: *The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he was anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God 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.*"

That's what Jesus had been sent to do. Then Jesus rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant, and sat down. And then, in a surprising statement, to emphasize that his mission was God's response to the promises God had given to his people, Jesus said, "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*"

You know, this is kind of strange for a mission statement, to say it has been fulfilled, just in its hearing! We see mission statements all the time in schools, non-profits, churches and other institutions – they are words put together by the

stakeholders in an organization to state their purpose and reason for existence, their task of work which they *intend* to do. They usually remain buried in annual reports, unseen by human eyes and unheard by human ears! But Jesus didn't say this scripture *might* be fulfilled, or this scripture *will* be fulfilled *someday*, he said this scripture *has* been fulfilled *today!* "It had come to pass" in Jesus, and so Isaiah's promise had now come true in Jesus, whose presence confirmed the reality that God did indeed have good news for the poor, that the oppressed would go free, and this was the year, the time, of God's favor. As one of the main characters of the Stephen Spielberg film *The Goonies* said, "This is OUR time!" This was now God's time – proclaimed in Jesus, "*my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*"

Today's passage from Luke doesn't tell us how Jesus' audience reacted to Jesus saying this. Next week, we will hear how, at first, everyone was impressed, and spoke well of him. Then they started murmuring "isn't this Joseph's son, the carpenter?" Jesus said more things that offended them, and they would end up rejecting him and take him to the outside of town, to the edge of a cliff. But that's *next week's sermon*, and I hate to spoil the surprise, so today we'll stick with Jesus' announcement of God's mission for him, which everyone was pleased to hear. Kind of like on the Martin Luther King holiday, when everyone hears King's *I Have a Dream* speech, sing *We Shall Overcome* and *Happy Birthday To Ya*, eat breakfast and go home happily inspired. Even mayors, governors and police get into the celebration, and if there's a march, politicians get in the front row, linking arms! We forget all about Governor Wallace standing for segregation on the steps of the capitol of Alabama, against the dream, and police chief Bull Connor siccing dogs and fire hoses on children in Birmingham. We forget that people threw bricks at Martin Luther King in "democratic" Chicago, because they were so angry at him for speaking the truth about racism, poverty, and the Vietnam War. We focus on the inspiring words we like from King, and neglect the truths by which he challenged us. We made King a hero only after he was safely and long dead.

It was the same with Jesus! We love that Jesus turned water into wine (more wine, Jesus!), that Jesus fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. Magic always fascinates us! We also love that Jesus was raised from the dead by the power of God – his greatest "trick" yet! But we hate to hear the story again of the betrayal of Jesus by his disciples, the unjust charges and trial by Pontius Pilate, and the great suffering Jesus endured on the cross. We don't come so willingly to Good Friday services to hear of Jesus' passion – we'd much rather come to celebrate Christmas and Easter, because the music is more upbeat and the food tastes better (we prefer ham and cheeses over vinegar and bitter herbs!). Too often we skim over the challenges Jesus gave us to "*take up your cross and follow me*", "*feed the hungry and clothe the naked*", and we seldom say that "*bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives...and let the oppressed go free*"

is the work of the Church! We ‘re okay with Jesus saying it 2000 years ago, but if we hear a pastor preach the same thing today, some say “politics don’t belong in the Church!” Am I wrong about that? What is our mission from God, if not this?

If we take Jesus seriously, we, the Church – you and me – have to finish the sermon for him, or at least keep on preaching the words he spoke back then, and bring the good news into reality today! This isn’t “ancient scripture” folks, even though it is scripture, and Jesus said these things 2000 years ago. But Jesus lived and died for these words of God’s truth, and he said , *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!”* Do you get that? God’s Word in Jesus is fulfilled TODAY – right now – as you and I read it, speak it and hear it! The Word of God comes alive every time we speak and hear it, for Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, made real, and the Risen Jesus is present with you and me today, in the Word that is spoken and preached, and in the bread and wine that we eat and drink, given power by Jesus’ words *“This is my body given for you, this is my blood, shed for you!”* So the Word has come alive in Jesus, who is with us today, and we can hear Jesus saying to you and me, right now: *THIS IS GOD’s TIME!!* Forget *“The Goonies* – life is not a movie – but we can use some of that same enthusiasm and self-discovery, when we realize that THIS IS *our* TIME for witness to God’s good news, which God has given to us. For WE ARE THE CHURCH today, and it’s our time to proclaim good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to those oppressed because of their religion, gender, skin color, or sexual orientation.

God knows that there are so many ways that people have been made poor, held captive or detained, and oppressed in this world. We are all longing to hear some good news for a change – with all the bad news we hear and see, each and every day! So Jesus invites every one of us, every child of God, to participate in proclaiming God’s good news to all people, through the Church, his “body”.

There are as many ways to do this work as there are types of “gifts” that God has given us. The Apostle Paul wrote about them in Corinthians, that there are many members, and many differing gifts, but one body in the Church. We have eyes and ears, noses and mouths, hands and feet – all are indispensable parts of the one body. So in the Church some of us preach and teach, some of us sing or play music, some of us read, some of us hear and pray, some of us greet visitors and some show hospitality to strangers, some cook, some clean, for we all have our own ways to build up the Body of Christ, and so bear witness using the gifts that God gives us! We celebrate all of these gifts and say thank you, as we gather as a congregation today. For all of these things that we do add up, in the end, as part of the Church’s mission to invite and welcome all children of God into discipleship, to worship God, proclaim good news, forgive sins, do justice, release prisoners, feed the hungry, give sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free! Thanks be to God for giving us this mission, for by it we all are set free for life! Amen.

For the ministry of Reconciling Works and Lutheran congregations who welcome all God's children, especially those who identify as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender or queer. Help us to resist those who abuse and discriminate against transgender adults or youth in the name of religion. Strengthen us to show welcome, inclusion and equity in the Church and society for all who are oppressed. Lord, in your mercy, **Hear our prayer.**