

3rd Sunday after Epiphany C 23 January 2022

Luke 4:14-21

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

"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 favour." ... "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Let's pray...

If you observe people closely, it doesn't take long to note that many live with one foot in the past and one foot in the future. Many people are held back by the sins of the past. Many people's lives are dominated and held back by guilt, shame, and deep, festering psychological, emotional, and spiritual wounds. They ruminate about events of the past, lost opportunities, wounds, and regrets. They are their own jailers, imprisoned by their own history, things they coulda', woulda', shoulda' done.

Then, there's the rising cacophony of fear about the uncertainty of the future and what might or might not happen. People are frightened. Their lives are dominated by questions and uncertainties. And the prophets of doom are unhelpful. One commentator I heard on the television recently declared: "The world is going to hell in a handbasket." And while the more moderate might list their hopes and aspirations for the way they want their life to be, they admit that these are things they can neither predict nor control.

The problem with a worldview of living with one foot in the past and one in the future is that it completely ignores the present. We become captive to what was, oppressed by what might be, and blind to what is. Our life is impoverished, small, and empty. We are absent to God, others, and even ourselves. We're unavailable to those we love, to the needs of the world, and to the fullness of life that God offers.

That's no way to live. That's not the way Jesus lives and it's not the life to which he calls us. The life Jesus offers us is a life of freedom. I'm not talking about selfishness, the ability to choose and do what we want, a life determined by individual preferences. I'm talking about the freedom to become and be fully alive, the freedom to become and be fully human, the freedom to become and be fully Christlike. That only exists here and now, in the present moment.

The Roman poet, Horace, first published the term, "*Carpe diem*" in his *Odes* (I.11) in 23 BCE. It loosely means, "seize the day." The full version goes, "*carpe diem quam minimum credula postero*", "pluck the day, trusting as little as possible in the next one." Jesus captures this sentiment somewhat in his *Sermon on the Mount* when he says, "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own" (Matthew 6:34a). Whichever way you look at it, the message is quite clear – "This... is the day that the Lord has made." Will we choose to rejoice and be glad in it?

Jesus neither looks back at connections to the past nor looks forward anxiously to what might happen in the future. He comes to his people in the here and now circumstances of their lives. That's what he did that day in Nazareth and it's what he does for each of us today. "Filled with the power of the Spirit" and "anointed to bring good news to the poor," he comes "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 favour" (Luke 4:14,18-20).

This includes you, and it includes me. We are the poor, the captive, the blind, the oppressed, and the ones seeking the Lord's favour. How we interpret this for ourselves depends on our own lives and experiences.

Poverty usually brings to mind a shortage of money or resources such as food, clothing, or housing. These are material things. But we can also experience poverty of love, hope, or meaning. Whichever way we consider it, poverty points to an emptiness about the world. The captive might be a prisoner, an addicted person, a cancer patient, or one overcome by anger and resentment.

Regardless, the world becomes small and closes in. Blindness isn't only physical but can also be emotional or spiritual. This makes the world appear dark. Oppression happens in hundreds of ways from physical limitation or emotional violence, to racism, fear, or profound sorrow. Oppression makes the world seem cruel and unsafe.

When our conscience is assailed by any of these situations, when life gets really tough and overbearing, it's easy and tempting to run away, to get stuck in the past, or fixate on the future. I'm not painting a rosy picture, am I? And that's deliberate because as much as the villain seems to grab the limelight in the drama of life, and would leave us bereft of hope, he only sets the stage for the imminent entrance of the hero, or in our way of thinking, the Saviour.

Jesus isn't a memory relegated to the annals of history. Nor is he hidden in an unknown future. Jesus comes to us today, here, now. The only place we can meet Jesus is in this present moment, today, regardless of anything else that might be happening in our lives.

In Luke's gospel, and indeed, right now, "Today" is the first word of Jesus' public teaching. It's not about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow. It's about today. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today, Jesus brings good news to the poor. Today, Jesus proclaims release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. Today, Jesus lets the oppressed go free. Today, Jesus proclaims the year of the Lord's favour. Today, Jesus galvanizes the hearts and minds of his faithful to serve the needs of the people of Tonga. Today, Jesus says, "Do not fear, I love you."

Here's the irony. Too often, we miss today because we fret over yesterday and worry about tomorrow. Yet, the reality of Christ's declaration and presence in his word, "Today", means that he has already healed our past and is preparing us for the future. Good news, release, sight, freedom, the Lord's favour. All of these things are real and happening today, irrespective of what's happening around or within us.

And these aren't just things Jesus does, they're the manifestation of God's presence, life, and love with, for, and in God's people. They're manifestations of the freedom Christ brings and they're fulfilled in our hearing. If we're unable to hear Jesus' words, we're either stuck in the past or living in a future we don't yet have.

Hearing is about more than merely processing sounds. It's about our openness and receptivity. We must be willing to take into ourselves the reality and truth of what is spoken. We must also be willing to take into ourselves the life and presence of the one who is speaking. Jesus isn't merely speaking words to us. Jesus is speaking new life. His speaking and our hearing merge so that our lives become one life, and it *is* happening today.

Saints, I'm not blind to the events of the world, nor am I idealistic. The whole world is groaning under the weight of a prolonged pandemic and its sometimes-cruel consequences. But I always try to keep in view the far greater, infinitely more powerful, and all-conquering pandemic, and that is, the grace and love that Jesus Christ has for you, right here, right now. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds today and always, in Christ Jesus who was, is, and always will be. Amen.