

FIRST LESSON

NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

PSALM

PSALM 19

SECOND LESSON

1ST CORINTHIANS 12:12-31A

GOSPEL LESSON

ST. LUKE 4:14-21

PRAYER OF THE DAY

BLESSED LORD GOD, YOU HAVE CAUSED THE HOLY SCRIPTURES TO BE WRITTEN FOR THE

NOURISHMENT OF YOUR PEOPLE.

GRANT THAT WE MAY HEAR THEM, READ, MARK, LEARN, AND INWARDLY DIGEST THEM, THAT, COMFORTED BY YOUR PROMISES, WE MAY EMBRACE AND FOREVER

HOLD FAST TO THE HOPE OF ETERNAL LIFE, THROUGH YOUR SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD.

AMEN.

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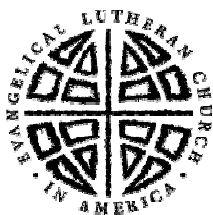
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Living in God's amazing grace

Liturgical Day: The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

Date: January 21, 2007

Sermon Title: Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

This morning's Gospel lesson – the story of the very first sermon Jesus preached in his hometown synagogue — this lesson includes a very famous quotation from the prophet Isaiah. In Chapter 61, Isaiah says:

*The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;*ⁱ

This portion of Isaiah comes from about 700 years before Christ, when Israel and Judah had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and many of Jerusalem's leaders were either killed or carried off into captivity. Some believe that Isaiah himself had been captured, and was hauled off to Babylon with a number of other leading Judeans.

It was a dark and depressing time for God's people. They had lived for generations with the hope that the promise to Abraham (that they would be a mighty nation, respected by their neighbors, and in possession of a great land) would be fulfilled among them. But living in a foreign land and longing for the home they once knew, they began to wonder if they had believed those promises in vain. Perhaps God didn't have a plan for them. Perhaps they never were going to be a great nation. Perhaps it all was one big misunderstanding.

Into that dark and depressing time, the prophet Isaiah spoke a word of comfort to God's people. Isaiah said that the Spirit of God was afoot, and that God had anointed him to do incredible things: to bring good news to the oppressed; to bind up the brokenhearted, to release the captives, to comfort all who mourn. Through the voice of Isaiah, God spoke to their most urgent needs, and those who believe were vindicated. Israel did return to its homeland. God's promise was fulfilled. The journey back was not without cost, but it was a joyful one, eventually leading those faithful people back to their home and back to the promises of God.

That's the way it is with God's word. No matter how one feels; no matter what one's experience is; no matter what other painful realities press in and seek to diminish hope, God's word speaks to the most urgent needs there are, and it makes a difference.

These particular words of Isaiah, powerful in the 7th Century B.C., become powerful again, hundreds of years later, when Jesus speaks them. Only this time, they have a completely different result.

According to St. Luke's Gospel, when Jesus is 30 years old [Luke 3:23], he begins his work as Messiah. It starts with his baptism, when the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove, and a voice comes from heaven saying: "You are my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased." [Luke 3:21] Jesus then is led out into the

ⁱ Isaiah 61:1-2, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

wilderness for forty days, where he is tempted by the devil. Immediately following that experience, St. Luke tells us, Jesus returns home and preaches his very first sermon in his hometown synagogue. It is based on the same Isaiah text we just considered. His message has to do with good news for the poor; with release for the captives; with recovery of sight for the blind; with freedom for the oppressed.

The text he reads that day includes the same good news that Isaiah shared with God's people some seven hundred years earlier. In those days, God's people were awaiting the arrival of one who would save them from their captivity. A Savior. One anointed by God. A Messiah who would overthrow the Babylonian powers-that-be, and set them free. Isaiah promised that this one would come. And eventually he did. When Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians, he did indeed set God's people free, and granted them permission to return to their homes.

That's the point at which this particular word of God begins to speak differently in Jesus' time than it did in Isaiah's time, because immediately after reading the text, Jesus delivers the zinger. He sits down, and when every eye in the synagogue is fixed on him, he quietly, simply and powerfully says:

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

He doesn't say, "The day will come." He doesn't ask the people to wait in hope. He doesn't promise that eventually God will remember. He says, "The Spirit is upon me... and the day has come." He says:

Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Can you imagine how hard it must have been for those friends and relatives of his from Nazareth to believe that? Luke tells us that Jesus returns from the wilderness filled with the Spirit, and wanders from town to town teaching in their synagogues. Word spreads about him all around the country. As he teaches, he is praised by everyone. But when they see him, they see a strong, spirited, faithful adult, who is obviously quite "in tune" with God's word and will. He is, in their eyes, a religious expert. (You know what they say these days: an expert is one who comes from at least a hundred miles away, and has handouts. The guy at the next desk could say the same thing, and nobody would even notice. But pay an expert to come, and everyone's ears perk up in a different way.) That's the way it is for those whose cities Jesus visits.

But that isn't the case – that can't be the case – in Nazareth. To them, he is Mary and Joseph's kid. To them, he is the boy who grew up next door. To them, he is the one who once broke a pump handle, or left his coat at school, or didn't get along with the kid from across the village... He is just one of them. The kid next door, grown up, and now reading the promise of Isaiah in their midst and saying:

Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

How could they possibly believe that? How could he possibly be the Messiah of God? How could he possibly be the one for whom they had been waiting all these years? He was the kid next door, grown up and impressive, for sure, but still the kid from next door.

Isn't it interesting to note how easily we discount the words of one too familiar? And that is especially the case when they don't line up with what we wanted to hear in the first place. Not only is Jesus the kid from next door, but listen to the way he describes what God will accomplish through him:

The poor shall receive good news.

The captives shall be released

The blind will recover their sight.

The oppressed will go free.

My best guess is that if you were to ask those who heard Jesus' first sermon – those residents of Nazareth – what their most urgent needs were, they would respond by talking about good weather for the summer crops, or the removal of those Roman forces who had been occupying the country for so long, or a little extra left over at the end of the year to save for old age. But they probably wouldn't have been able to articulate that their most urgent need was that the poor, the captive, the blind, or the oppressed in their day would be made well. Yet that's the message Jesus brings. He was among them to touch their most urgent needs: that those who struggled most would be made well.

Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Hard for them, but frankly, hard for us as well. Hundreds of years later, this word of God speaks to us today, and it carries the same message. Today, God is present in this world. Today, God is moving in people's lives. And what is it that God is making happen? Well:

*The poor shall receive good news.
The captives shall be released
The blind will recover their sight.
The oppressed will go free.*

Now these are all very noble concepts. I doubt that a person in this room would disagree with having compassion for the poor, or those in captivity, or those who are blind, or those who are oppressed. I doubt that a person in this room would be unhappy with the prospect that God, one day, will make all of this happen, and their pain and suffering will come to an end. But what does it mean to take the words of Jesus literally?

Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

It means to realize that Jesus is here to meet our most urgent needs – and not only to meet our most urgent needs, but to transform our minds so that those things that matter most to him, begin also to matter most to us. In fact, these are our most urgent needs: that the poor receive good news, that the captives are released, that the blind see, and that the oppressed go free. As we find a heart for these concerns, we experience the transforming presence of Christ in our lives.

Today, this scripture is being fulfilled in our hearing. Today, God is working to share good news, release, sight and freedom with those who need it. And perhaps most importantly, today God is planning to make that happen through you and me. As we consider the world around us, and the needs we find there, may we be faithful to our call – our call to be the hands and ears and eyes and mouth of Christ in this world.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (January 21, 2007)

English Text: ⁱⁱ

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." ⁱⁱⁱ

Greek Text:

¹⁴ Καὶ ὑπέστρεψεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἐν τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ πνεύματος εἰς τὴν Γαλιλαίαν. καὶ φήμη ἐξῆλθεν καθ' ὅλης τῆς περιχώρου περὶ αὐτοῦ. ¹⁵ καὶ αὐτὸς ἐδίδασκεν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν δοξαζόμενος ὑπὸ πάντων. ¹⁶ Καὶ ἦλθεν εἰς Ναζαρά, οὗ ἦν τεθραμμένος, καὶ εἰσῆλθεν κατὰ τὸ εἰωθὸς αὐτῷ ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων εἰς τὴν συναγωγὴν καὶ ἀνέστη ἀναγνῶναι. ¹⁷ καὶ ἐπεδόθη αὐτῷ βιβλίον τοῦ προφήτου Ἰσαΐου καὶ ἀναπτύξας τὸ βιβλίον εὗρεν τὸν τόπον οὗ ἦν γεγραμμένον· ¹⁸ πνεῦμα κυρίου ἐπ' ἐμέ οὗ εἶνεκεν ἔχρισεν με εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς, ἀπέσταλκεν με, κηρύξαι

ⁱⁱ A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

ⁱⁱⁱ St. Luke 4:14-21, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

αἰχμαλώτοις ἄφεσιν καὶ τυφλοῖς ἀνάβλεψιν, ἀποστεῖλαι τεθραυσμένους ἐν ἀφέσει, ¹⁹κηρύξαι ἐνιαυτὸν κυρίου δεκτόν. ²⁰καὶ πτύξας τὸ βιβλίον ἀποδοὺς τῷ ὑπηρέτῃ ἐκάθισεν· καὶ πάντων οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ ἦσαν ἀτενίζοντες αὐτῷ. ²¹ἤρξατο δὲ λέγειν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ὅτι σήμερον πεπλήρωται ἡ γραφὴ αὕτη ἐν τοῖς ὠσὶν ὑμῶν. ^{iv}

First Lesson:

^{61.1} The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
 because the LORD has anointed me;
 he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
 to bind up the brokenhearted,
 to proclaim liberty to the captives,
 and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God;
 to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
 to give them a garland instead of ashes,
 the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
 the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
 They will be called oaks of righteousness,
 the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
 they shall raise up the former devastations;
 they shall repair the ruined cities,
 the devastations of many generations. ^v

^{iv} St. Luke 4:14-21, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.

^v Isaiah 61:1-4, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).