

Year C Epiphany 3 Today This Scripture Has Been Fulfilled in Your Hearing Luke 4 14 to 21

Jesus, the “made it big” hometown sweetheart has returned to Nazareth. He heads to the synagogue on the Sabbath just like he does everywhere he goes. He is warmly greeted by friends and family and he is given the honour of reading the Scriptures and teaching about them. The hometown crowd is eager to hear what this local gem has to say. Word has spread about their very own Jesus of Nazareth and they want to hear him for themselves.

Jesus is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah but he picks, carefully, the words he is going to proclaim that day. Jesus chooses a crowd favourite, he begins with the part where God tells his people that he is going to bring the long-awaited perfection – “to let the oppressed go free” (Is.58:6) – and then he reads the other part where God’s anointed is the one “to bring the good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour (Is.61:1-2a). Jesus then sits down, the posture of a respected, knowledgeable teacher and Jesus delivers a one-sentence sermon: “Today,” he says to the eager crowd, every eye on him, “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What a message! According to Luke, Jesus of Nazareth has just spoken the words of God as if they were his own. And Jesus of Nazareth has just spoken the words of God’s anointed one as if they were his own. God...and God’s anointed one...all rolled up into one – Jesus of Nazareth, the local boy, Mary and Joseph’s boy – telling the people before him that God and God’s anointed one are one and the same and he’s it. That’s a show-stopper of a message. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This message Jesus brings “is good news to every one of God’s children who is bound up, pressed down, broken in spirit, impoverished, imprisoned, and desperately hungry for good news [such as this]”.

The word that Luke uses for “poor” (ptochoi in Greek) embraces more than just a lack of money. It includes many other factors that lowered one’s status in the first-century world—factors such as whether you were male or female, who was in your family tree, your education, what you did for a living, your health status, whether or not you were born with a disability, and your degree of religious purity. Jesus’ mission is directed to the poor in the wide-ranging sense of anyone and everyone who has been cast to the margins of society. Jesus does not acknowledge socially determined boundaries, and, in fact, teaches that these very “outsiders” are the special objects of God’s grace and mercy – the blessed ones.

The “year of the Lord’s favour” that Jesus proclaims refers to the year of Jubilee commanded in Leviticus 25. It was the year when all slaves were to be released, all debts were to be forgiven, and all land and property returned to families who had leased or sold them. (Elisabeth Johnson, workingpreacher.org). It was to be a year of radical restoration – leveling the playing field so that society living according to God’s ways would never turn into an “us” and “them” society with the “haves” and “have nots,” the rich and poor, oppressed and oppressor, those with power and those at their mercy. There is very little evidence to suggest that this radical law was ever actually followed in Israel. It was, instead, something the people looked forward to as part of the Day of the Lord – when God would fix all of the brokenness, restore his people’s fortunes.

This coming time of perfection is what Jesus is proclaiming – and he is proclaiming that he is the one to bring it about. Luke makes sure that he tells us that Jesus has the power to back up his statement for, in addition to Jesus, there is another major player in this story today – the Holy Spirit. Luke tells us that Jesus returns to Nazareth “filled with the power of the Holy Spirit.” And when Jesus reads from Isaiah, the words make it clear that this power of the Holy Spirit is what enables him to do all of the wonderful, broken-world-fixing activities that he says he will do.

Because we are not hearing Luke’s Gospel read continuously as one story – we heard a story from John last Sunday – it is important to remind ourselves that Jesus is empowered by the Holy Spirit because he was anointed with the Holy Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan. Jesus was then sent, by the Holy Spirit, into the wilderness to work through earthly temptations, discern his path, and emerge stronger on the other side, ready to begin his mission that we hear him proclaim today.

Jesus’ mission is his baptismal journey. Baptism not a one-time event – we are not baptized and then “done.” Baptism is an ongoing journey – a process. For Jesus, this journey took him from the River Jordan to the cross where he died and then rose again in glory, in his resurrection body which would never die again. For baptism is not simply a cleansing rite that washes away sin. Jesus was sinless and yet was baptized because his was a new type of baptism – a baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire, a baptism that is full and complete entry into the kingdom of God as one of God’s own. For Jesus, the man from Nazareth, this entry into God’s kingdom was fully realized with the cross.

From font to fire of purification at our resurrection when we fully and completely enter into God's perfect kingdom, Jesus' life and our lives is an ongoing fulfillment of our baptisms.

Understanding this then, means that hearing this passage today will excite some of us, will empower some of us...but some of us will squirm, some of us will feel a little nervous, because those words that Jesus spoke – “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me” – those words are our words. “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.”

In the mystery of baptism, we joined Christ in his death so that we, too, will be resurrected as Jesus was. At our baptisms, we were anointed with the Holy Spirit. We were signed with the cross, marked as a child of God, Christ's own forever – connected with him, a part of his body along with every other baptized person. And so, Jesus' words are our words – The Spirit of the Lord is upon us because he has anointed us, empowered us with the Holy Spirit, who can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, to work toward the perfection of God's kingdom – to make each day a day of ongoing fulfillment of our baptisms.

As Jesus sat in the synagogue, every eye was upon him. Perhaps you've noticed in the news the spotlight that has been turned on the church lately? Many eyes are upon us. Global News ([‘Gone by 2040’: Why some religions are declining in Canada faster than ever - National | Globalnews.ca](#)) has spent two months speaking to religious members across Canada and has put together a three part series documenting decline, particularly in the Anglican denomination, and the

forever changes brought about by being the Church during a world-wide pandemic. Yet, at the same time, Canadians hunger for spiritual fulfillment ([A spectrum of spirituality: Canadians keep the faith to varying degrees, but few reject it entirely - Angus Reid Institute](#)), desiring a Church that is a living member of Christ's mystical body. A living member – not a “waiting to die to be with Christ” member – a living member.

Steve Aisthorpe, author of *Rewilding the Church*, draws on the research of others to shed some light on churches who are being what people are desiring. Robert Warren, he tells us, has discovered that thriving congregations are those who have learned to live the marks of Christ's life, to put aside “trying to please everyone,” and to live a life working, as Jesus did, toward the fulfillment of God's purpose (Aisthorpe, 82-3). Luke's Gospel story today is a blueprint for us of that life. In such a time as this, when we read distressing headlines suggesting the Anglican Church of Canada will be “Gone by 2040,” perhaps the most hope-giving news is in the work of theologians like Professor Leslie Francis and others: the environment we live in today, he asserts, bears many striking similarities to the environment in which Jesus and the disciples lived (Aisthorpe, 87). It is an environment of fertile soil where the early church grew in leaps and bounds – despite closing itself off, hiding itself from non-Christians for fear of persecution. And it grew because the followers of Jesus Christ did not simply label themselves as Christians, they lived as Christians. They lived as Christ lived making every day a day of ongoing fulfillment of their baptism.

Anointed with the Holy Spirit, living from River Jordan to cross, from font to fire of purification, we committed ourselves to live a life being drawn toward the

intended perfection of all things in Christ. Christ's words are our words. We strive to be able to say, confidently with Christ, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."