

Sermon

Epiphany 3C January 26, 2025

Luke 4:14-21

One of the problems with the Lectionary, any lectionary really, is that sometimes you get plopped down in the middle of a story without any context. For instance, can anyone give me the context for today's gospel? Where was Jesus immediately before this passage? Immediately before today's gospel story, he was in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. And now he's returned to familiar territory - Galilee and Nazareth.

In talking about the timeline of Jesus' ministry, one commentator says that Luke's story of Jesus in Galilee/Nazareth isn't chronologically first, but it is thematically first. That is, Luke uses this incident to tell us who Jesus is. It makes sense, then, that the Lectionary uses this reading at this time. Remember, Epiphany is the season of manifestation and revelation. Telling us who Jesus is helps reveal him to us and helps us reveal him to the world.

One of the things Luke is known for is painting Jesus as a prophet. A prophet in the biblical sense is not someone who predicts the future. A prophet in the biblical sense is someone who speaks God's truth to current situations.

The prophet Nathan spoke to David about his affair and murder. Jonah spoke to the people of Nineveh and called them to repentance. Ezekiel spoke to the people of Jerusalem saying that they were worse than Sodom in their behavior. Again and again prophets have spoken out against cities, nations, and kings for their mistreatment of widows, orphans, outcasts, foreigners, the hungry, the homeless, and more. Again and again prophets speak God's word to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. And in Luke, we see this prophet motif from Jesus in a number of places.

Jesus talks about God's grace being given to outsiders. He confronts Pharisees about their hypocrisy. He calls people to change. And he was fond of telling people the kingdom of God is among them now. The kingdom of God isn't a far-off event - it's here and now, and we need to see it.

In today's gospel passage we hear the first public words of Jesus. In Luke, the first words we actually hear from Jesus are as a child, but those are spoken only to his

parents. The first time we hear from Jesus as an adult is when he's in the wilderness being tempted by the devil, but there he only speaks to the devil. In this story he's in the synagogue reading from Isaiah, but there he's reading from Scripture. His own actual first public words in Luke is this: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

At the very beginning of his ministry, we get a glimpse of Jesus and his message. He is a prophet by his speaking God's truth to current situations. He is a prophet through his insistence that the kingdom of God is near. And he is a prophet because he has come to bring the fulfillment of Scripture.

For Jesus, this happens *today*. *Today* good news is given to the poor. *Today* captives of unjust systems are released. *Today* the blind will see. *Today* those who are oppressed will go free. This is what God is looking for, this is what Jesus came to do; and, by extension, this is what we are called to do as well.

We really live in two seasons. First, we live in a perpetual Season of Advent. That is, we live in a perpetual state of "already" and "not yet." We live in the already of the coming of Christ as evidenced by the existence of Christianity. We also live in the not yet as evidenced by how we view the kingdom of God as a far-off event and by how God's call to free the oppressed, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, do justice, love kindness, etc. etc. etc. go largely ignored. It's a hard thing to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor when the hungry are allowed to remain hungry, when people are stripped of their rights, and people live in fear for the simple act of existing.

Second, we also live in a perpetual Holy Saturday. That is, Christ has died, but resurrection has not yet come. We live today. God's reign is today. Knowing that, we cannot allow today to become nostalgic for yesterday. Nor can we allow today to become a vague promise of someday. Today is the day of the Lord, and today is all we've got.

When Jesus said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he wasn't just talking about the today of him sitting in a synagogue, he was also taking about every today when God is proclaimed. From the Song of Hannah to the Magnificat, from Amos to Zechariah, from Genesis to Revelation, God speaks of restorative justice and the fulfillment of promises that are to happen today.

But if these things are to happen today, if God's kingdom is to be manifested today, then it is up to us to make that happen. It is up to us to fight hate with love and vengeance with compassion. It is up to us to show kindness when those in power are focused on cruelty. It is up to us to protect the weak and speak for the voiceless.

If we are not willing to do these things on behalf of God today, then we become complicit in allowing those in power to sustain systems of inequality and abuse. And if we are complicit with systems that harm rather than help, then what are we even doing here?

The Season of Epiphany is about manifestation and revelation. Our gospel lesson points to Jesus as the focal point of restorative justice. This story tells us who Jesus is and what he is working for at the beginning of his public ministry. Let us do the same thing. Let us work for the kingdom of God today so that those whom society despises know they are loved and valued here and now- not at some unknown, pie-in-the-sky future, but now.

Today.

Amen.