

Epiphany 3
January 23, 2022

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. 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, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "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." 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. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Between Already and Not Yet

Prayer: Send your Spirit among us that we, like Jesus, may live the good news of liberation...

In these first weeks of the New Year we are inviting you to consider what we know about the beginning of Jesus' life and ministry:

- Christmas celebrates his birth – with its unusual circumstances; the journey to Bethlehem, nowhere to stay in town once they got there, the shepherds and angels.
- The visit of the wise ones – full of expectations, a hopeful moment.
- Larissa preached on the moment of his baptism by John in the river Jordan.
- Last week we looked at the first miracle that Jesus performed, turning water into wine, at a wedding in Cana in Galilee. It was a miracle which suggests the kind of Messiah he was going to be, revealed first and most obviously to those who were serving at the wedding feast, and then given to everyone a blessing – wine passed around and shared.

Goethe said, "Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it, beginnings have magic and power in them." The beginning of Jesus' ministry held the seeds of his whole ministry. I've entitled this sermon "Between Already and Not Yet" because he began it already, but we have not lived it fully – not yet. Jesus' ministry continues to focus forward.

Jesus opened the scroll and read from the prophet Isaiah, ch. 61, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives."

This reveals that Jesus was literate, finding his place in the scroll, which does not have page numbers, it reveals that he is recognized by his synagogue as one who is called upon to read

which means that they trained him to. What he does is to stand to read, and then sit down to teach, which is what rabbis do to this very day.

1. I've been thinking about what this means this week. You have an example outside today of what it means to bring good news to the poor – our Homelessness Awareness overnight vigil. Bringing awareness. No one who takes a shift out there in this weather will forget this. Not if they wanted to. Good news to the poor. Is manifested in many of our missions partners, shelters, food programs, support.

2. Release to the captives: (Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance) GHIAA's major accomplishment in the previous legislative session was the clean slate initiative. A major issue in the greater Hartford area has been the high incarceration rates, taken together with the difficulty that felons have in finding work following their release. Background checks reveal what they have done. What does it mean to release the captives, giving them freedom to live lives of dignity and purpose? Two of the last four churches that I have served were near drop off sites for released prisoners. I've had many conversations with these men, prepared and unprepared for the moment of their release, wondering how to find it within themselves to value freedom over the safety and predictability of prison. How to build a life after years sidelined from their lives.

It means employment, it means education and training, it means not judging someone by the worst day of their life. It's a huge area, and Jesus named it as his mission.

3. Recovery of sight to the blind. Literally, this is something Jesus did. He had a healing ministry so stunning that large groups followed him around seeking to be healed.

Someone recently described bodily aging to me as being like driving a car that you can't afford to replace. Jesus offers second chances even with the body. Leprosy, bleeding, blindness, the use of limbs again – healed all of it. He even raised a few people from the dead. Talk about your second chances.

4. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This is fiscal policy which is controversial. It refers to the cancellation of all debts in the jubilee year. The idea is that once every 50 years, all debts are forgiven and that people who lost property can regain it. You'd be able to return to the place that you once called home. It is first outlined in Leviticus; we have no evidence that anyone ever actually practiced it. But what an idea! Every 50 years, everyone starts over together, financially. So clearly, this is good news if you are poor and previously swindled, if you have worked hard and saved hard, or if you are wealthy, you may have mixed feelings. What does that mean now?

What does Jesus' mission statement mean now?

Maybe the healing of inherited genetic disease, maybe a recovery from addictions, maybe the rains will return to the west and the wildfires will stop, the coral reefs around the world will revive, the sea levels will not rise and overtake shoreline communities, the climate crisis

averted, some way out of this pandemic which experts tell us may be with us for a long time, and also that we need to do everything we can not to catch it and spread it.

In the story of God with God's people, in any moment of devastation, God sows the seeds of new life.

Because it is who God is. It is the nature of God. It always has been. Jesus understood this about God's work in our world at the beginning of his ministry, and we can too. And he went forward with it.

Jesus says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." And it's the beginning again. It's the beginning of an old story, building up the ancient ruins, the devastations of many generations. It has already begun, it is not yet finished.

If you can stand the tension, the already and the not yet of how God works in the world -- you can be part of God's transforming, redemptive power in the world.

Martin Luther King, Jr brilliantly and famously tapped into the already and not yet of Jesus' message. Without violence or hatred, he said: "I have a dream..." and outlined a vision for our country living proudly and rightly without the blight of racism. It's a dream because we have to imagine it. Our world is racist. He helped so many to see that the blight of racism doesn't have to be – it cannot be compared with the lives of dignity and purpose that in God's love is our mutual heritage, as heirs together of God's kingdom. Martin Luther King, Jr claimed a piece of the promise long before the ramifications of his words could be worked out. And they continue to be worked out. We have come a long way, but there is still a long way to go. We have accomplished a lot already, but we are not finished – not yet.

Jesus begins in Nazareth with something of a mission statement: He has been filled with the power of the Spirit and anointed to bring good news to the poor. To know our mission and to understand what God has given us to do, is as important to us today as it was to Jesus.

If you have parented a child, you know that you live in the already and the not yet in the process of parenting. You already love them, already believe in them, and they have not yet become the people you know they can be, the people they will be. When Mary told the servants at the Wedding at Cana, "do whatever he tells you," she was living into that – she knew who he was, she just wasn't sure exactly how he was going to claim it for himself.

God's work is bigger than yours. You are invited to claim the already for your own. God already loves you, already redeems your past mistakes and mis-steps, already knows your broken heart – and nevertheless loves you more than you can love God in return. You are invited by God, to live into the not yet. To hope for things which are not yet seen, to have faith in what will be proven in time. Jesus stood up in that synagogue and said it: "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." It's the beginning of his ministry, but for those

of us who have ears to hear, who know how the story of his life went, we can see that it carries the seeds of his death on the cross within it, and Easter's final triumph over death.

So, we can begin today, to live in light of Jesus' promises for us: the promises which we know are already ours, the promises which are not yet fully ours. God has been faithful for generations, and God is starting over today. We begin again, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us...these scriptures are fulfilled in our hearing." It's a promise. It's good news. It's not entirely up to our own efforts; God is working in our midst. It is already and not yet.

Questions for reflection and conversation:

*Do you think that proclaiming: "good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor;" was *only* Jesus' ministry or does it include the work of his followers as well?

*If you identify it as your charge also, where do you engage in that work today?

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Benediction:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us.

The Spirit of the Lord is in us.

Anointing us,

Sending us.

To bring good news

to bind up

to proclaim favor

to comfort

to provide

to loosen.

The day of the Lord is coming.

The day of the Lord has come.