

Jesus' First Sermon: Today!

Introduction to Scripture:

In his hometown synagogue, and near the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, Jesus reads from the book of Isaiah and announces that his ministry will fulfill a vision of liberation, benefiting outsiders and the powerlessness described by the prophet. This is Jesus' purpose and mission, and this is the first time he says it out loud.

Scripture:

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.'

Sermon: *Jesus' First Sermon: Today!*

First things are important. First words. First steps. First accomplishments. Many of these things are rather happenstance, when you think about it, but they're important because they make an impression and are memorable simply because of the very fact they happened first.

But other times, the "firsts" of our lives are not at all happenstance, but quite intentional. The first speech you give as captain or coach of a team. The first meeting you run in a new job. The first lesson you prepare as a teacher with a new class of students. The restaurant or movie you choose for a first date. The first sermon you give in a new congregation.

Today, we hear of one of those intentional "firsts" for Jesus. This is not, actually, the first time he has been in the synagogue, but it is the first sermon we hear of, and it makes quite and what he says makes quite an impression.

I wonder if it's not unlike the person who flies every week for work with frequent flyer miles in the millions. How often have they heard the emergency instructions by the flight attendants just before takeoff? How much do any of us who fly (or used to fly) frequently pay attention to these instructions?

But then imagine that on a flight just before landing the pilot interrupts the routine to tell you that there is possibly landing gear trouble. You look out at the approaching airport to see the fire engines assembled alongside the runway. You've had to circle, dump fuel and listen to emergency procedures again but this time - guess what... everyone will be paying close attention, as if your lives depend on it.

I think it might have been something like that for the men in the synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus showed up that day as he reveals the meaning of his life and work through the beloved and well-worn words of Scripture - Isaiah 61. Words his audience has heard a thousand times. Words no doubt rich with communal memory and meaning, but also words in danger of losing their power because they were SO familiar.

You see, for Jesus' first sermon, he doesn't improvise; he opens the book and makes the old words of the tradition his own: *God 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.*

This year of the Lord's favor is also called the Jubilee year, which, according to the Torah, instructed the people to return the land back to its original owners. It was designed to prevent wealthy landowners from accumulating large tracts of land at the expense of the common person.

These are powerful words in which Jesus reveals God's version of justice. These are the kind of words that inspire prophetic leaders like Martin Luther King, Oscar Romero, and Dorothy Day. But on this day, Jesus chooses to embrace it for himself.

After laying out God's vision for the world, he places this mantle on himself, because, as Jesus declares: ***Today, this scripture has been fulfilled just as you heard it.*** Not yesterday, not tomorrow, not in the next life, but today.

In Jesus, these words live, *here and now*. It is organic, it breathes, it moves in fresh and revolutionary ways. The Word of God is not dull nor dead. It is *alive*.

When Jesus uses the word "today," he's declaring that the kingdom of God has begun, and that it would be marked by a message of liberation and hope – not for the powerful and the rich, but for the poor, the oppressed, the imprisoned – that is, the people living on the margins of society.

Since we recently observed the birthday of Martin Luther King, it's good to remember that Dr. King wasn't just a leader in the Civil Rights Movement. He focused his attention on God's justice as he took up issues that made him rather unpopular to say the least.

When prophets talk justice, they have a tendency to make enemies!

And Jesus had his enemies! This first sermon at home ends up antagonizing the people 'til they want to run him off a cliff (which is actually what happens next!).

Imagining the turmoil within Jesus' home congregation got me to remembering the historical context I read about recently when, in 18th and 19th century America, southerners would gather for worship. It was common for slaveholding white people to bring their slaves to church with them.

The white people sat in the front, while the enslaved Black people sat in the back or in galleries above. I knew that had happened, but hadn't thought about what it would have been like for the pastor to preach in that setting and situation.

White people in these slaveholding churches would have known they were the main audience – the heirs to God's promise, blessed with wealth and power and salvation happening for them day after day after day.

Black people in those churches? They would have been overhearing promises aimed by the pastor at the people who controlled them. They were hearing sermons intended to keep them in their place – a place that was dangerous and painful and humiliating by design. And everybody had gotten used to it.

But what if, one day, the message of grace and liberation was aimed not at the folks up front, but at people all around the edges and in back? That's the kind of shift that was felt by the "front pew" folks in Nazareth. And they didn't like it one bit, when the blessings they expected for themselves were directed elsewhere.

No wonder they became so angry, they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff.

Jesus' first sermon is a kind of mission statement, an identity statement. You want to know what Jesus is all about? Well this is it.

From the vantage point of 2,000 years of history, we know that what he said was not just something that got him into trouble, but was life changing for those who had / have ears to hear.

Jesus has come to keep God's promises. And not just promises in general, but God's promises to heal, restore, comfort, free, and release, all as a sign of God's love and favor.

God's favor. Remember back to the Christmas story - Mary had found favor with God. And then at Jesus' baptism, God said, "You are my Son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased."

God's favor. And Jesus has come to tell everyone - and he means EVERYONE- that, and not just tell it but show it by embodying and bringing about the various acts of mercy and healing Isaiah describes.

"Today," Jesus says 2,000 years ago. And in doing so he afflicts the comfortable, and comforts the afflicted.

And "Today," Jesus tells us, we too are the object of God's desire, the recipients of God's love, and the children with whom God is well pleased.

Feeling trapped? In Jesus is freedom!

Can't see the way ahead? Follow Jesus - he'll show you the way.

Not feeling blessed? Well, this IS the year of God's favor!

Which all sounds good on paper - but really? During Covid time? I don't know about you, but these days, I'm having a hard time embracing the holiness of "today." So much of the last two year has been living "on hold." Deferring and deflecting, as if the days we live in right now don't count as "real life."

Real life will resume after the pandemic. Real life will resume when everyone can gather safely for worship and we can sing hymns like we used to. When we can stop using those difficult little cups for communion. When we can put away our masks for good.

Maybe we assume that we can't lean into God's joy and favor until all our griefs over the losses of the past two years are thoroughly in the past; or when we get some sort of handle on climate change, police brutality, teen depression, and sectarian violence.

Jesus' first sermon pushes against this...

reminding us that God's embrace is wide enough to hold *all* of human experience.

reminding us that we can trust that divine abundance is possible now, even in the midst of uncertainty and pain.

that we can say "Amen" to God's word in the complicated circumstances we live in now -
Today!

During this season of Epiphany, we are invited again and again to look for signs and glimpses of revelation. Of light. Of God's transforming presence.

We are asked to hold in tension the linear, "ordinary" time we experience as human beings, and the sacred time of God's perpetual inbreaking.

We are called to trust that even in the mundane day-to-day of life on earth, God's "now" brims with the possibility of joy and feasting.

Jesus brought salvation for everyone. That was his message from the start. And he invited all people to come to him and to go with him. He invites us, too. And if we want to share in all that Jesus came to do, then we have to be asking with him: Who needs good news and release? Who needs to have their eyes opened and their debts forgiven?

How can we receive what Jesus has to offer us, while also remembering that God's news is for everyone? It's important to figure that out ... so that we can both receive Christ's salvation and also extend it to where it is most needed today.

It's no small thing to be the church – to be Christ's body in the world. What a privilege it is to be entrusted with the good news of redemption and release – not just as a story we tell – though we do tell it – but to be invited to live it and to share it – as freely as it's been shared with us.

Today!

Amen.