

Epiphany 3A 2019, Luke 4:14-21, January 27, 2019, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Lancaster, PA, Kurt S. Strause

That wasn't the kind of sermon they expected. When most other rabbis read that passage from Isaiah they took either one of two different approaches. One direction looked to the past and extolled the wisdom of the old prophet. That kind of sermon went something like this: "In the past, our fathers and mothers envisioned a world of justice, peace, and healing. The fullness in a land of milk and honey as God promised to Moses and his people." The other approach looked to the future in which they might have heard something like this: "We, along with Isaiah, await the fulfillment of the promise. The poor will be lifted up, the prisoners set free, the blind will see. Oh, how we long for that day! We pray for it to come. But it seems so slow in arriving." Jesus could have taken either of those two approaches, "How great Isaiah was in the past!" or, "The kingdom of God will come!" but he did neither. He said, "Today this promise is fulfilled."

Next Sunday we'll get to hear their reaction, which to let you in on a bit, was at first warm and then quickly turned hostile. But today let's just sit here in this moment.

We do well to both honor our past and anticipate our future. Remembering the faith of our ancestors who sacrificed their time and treasure to gift us with a beautiful church and a glorious tradition of scripture, music, and liturgy. We labor hard to preserve this tradition and pass it on to the generations that come after us. Anticipating the future with hope and expectation derives from the biblical witness and is a faithful response to God's promises.

But living primarily in the past or even in the future has its shadow side. Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia. Here we might believe our better days are behind us. We look at the church and we see fewer and fewer people attend. We remember a day when Sundays were special. We think of those days and we are filled with grief and fear, a fear that it can never be the same, never be as good as it once was. The same is true about overemphasizing the future. We believe that the present is never good enough, that there will always be something better that never seems to become true. And so, we grow disappointed in prayers seemingly unanswered and hopes unfulfilled. I think this describes large sections of the modern church today, not confined to this congregation, but in general. We are often caught between extolling the good old days and a deepening fear that some promised future will never arrive.

Being caught between past and future means today is lost. But today can be a deeply unsettling place to be, because today insists we lay aside both the past and the future to fully embrace this moment. This is the place Jesus invites us to see ourselves in his brief sermon on the prophet Isaiah. "Today" places us in the

middle of this sacred drama. Today invites us to see ourselves as agents and actors in God's love for the world.

"Look around you," Jesus is saying to his friends, "see the Holy Spirit at work. God is with us, now, today, freeing, liberating, healing." Jesus is asking his friends to open their eyes, to see the love of God and how God is keeping his promises no matter how awful the outward appearances may be. Jesus calls us to see more deeply. To see past the immediate sins, injustice, trials, and evils of human life to the profound reality of love and compassion upon which everything truly rests: the love of God and love of neighbor. If we can begin to see now, how today God is at work as the active force of love in the world, then our hatreds and our fears begin to melt away, our willingness to seek revenge or inflict hurt fades. Even in the midst of the worst oppression the world has to offer God remains active, today, not just in the past nor only in the future. God is with us. Jesus invites us to join with him in his transforming work of love.

The Holy Spirit rested upon Jesus that day when he gave his sermon. But the Holy Spirit rested upon his friends also because they were part of that community. By emphasizing the word "today" Jesus transformed these words from Isaiah into a powerful invitation to the whole community to act on behalf of God's justice. So, the words might be heard like this:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me and upon you as well,  
Because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent us 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.

The Holy Spirit rested upon Jesus. The Holy Spirit rested upon those who heard him and were invited to take up God's work of love for those captive, oppressed, and blind. The Holy Spirit rests upon you and me. Not just yesterday. And not only tomorrow. But today. In this moment. Between a past full of faith and a future full of promise. Today all is fulfilled and you and I are called to live the life of God's love on behalf of a hungry and hurting world. Amen.