

## **Epiphany 3C 2022 Sermon**

January 23, 2022

ANNUAL MEETING SUNDAY

### ***Luke 4:16-30***

*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 Jesus 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.”*

There is a tradition in our nation that on the day a president is inaugurated, that president gives an Inaugural Address. During such addresses, presidents lay out their vision of America and set forth their goals for the nation. It was during his Inaugural Address in 1933 that Franklin D. Roosevelt told the people of this nation, “we have nothing to fear but fear itself.” It was during his Inaugural Address in 1961 that John F. Kennedy said, “And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”

But perhaps the most poignant, soul-searching, plea-filled Inaugural Address ever given by an American president was Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, which he gave on March 4, 1865. The Civil War was ending, and President Lincoln was faced with the daunting task of reunifying a nation torn in two between North and South. 620,000 Americans were killed by their fellow Americans in that war. On that cold Inaugural Day in 1865, Abraham Lincoln said to his war-torn nation, “With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

In today's Gospel, Jesus gives what Bible scholars have called **his** "Inaugural Address" in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth. He enters the synagogue on the sabbath day, and he is chosen to be the one to read the Scripture that day. He asks for the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, from which he reads: "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." He then rolls up the scroll, sits down, and begins to say to the hometown crowd, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Those words from the prophet Isaiah comprise Jesus' Inaugural Address, and they become Jesus' mission statement. His mission, which he receives from the Holy Spirit, is to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed; and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Now, biblical scholars point out the fact that all of these things which Jesus has been anointed by the Spirit to do are things that were prescribed in an amazing Jewish law found in the Book of Leviticus (Lev. 25:8ff). We read in Leviticus that every 50 years there was to be a Jubilee Year, during which debts were forgiven, people who had come upon hard times and had sold their land were restored to their ancestral property, and slaves were set free. Forgiveness, restoration, and freedom are God's law, God's intention for God's people.

The ancient Jews *knew* what it was like to be in bondage, for they themselves had been slaves in Egypt and captives in Babylon. And they remembered that God delivered them from that slavery and captivity, for God does not want people to live in bondage. Within the Reign of God, people live in freedom!

And the ancient Jews *also* knew what it was to be poor and hungry and homeless, for they had experienced all of these things as they wandered in the Sinai Desert for 40 years. But they remembered that God had brought them *through* all of those hardships, had delivered them from their 40 years of wandering in the desert, and had brought them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. God's ultimate will was that God's people be **free** from poverty, hunger, disease, and homelessness. And so, God gave the people a law which decreed that every 50 years the entrenched, oppressive conditions under which God's people were suffering would be done away with. God's people would restore God's will. God's people would show mercy and grace toward those in bondage or in hunger or in poverty or without a home.

It's all very amazing to me, this law of the Jubilee Year; for, if there is another ancient culture that practiced such gratuitous forgiveness of debt, restoration of land, and freeing of slaves every 50 years, I am not aware of it. The God of the Hebrews, *unlike* the gods of other ancient cultures, was full of mercy and grace. As we read in the Book of Psalms (and I quote from *The Message* translation),

“GOD makes everything come out right; he puts victims back on their feet... GOD is sheer mercy and grace; ... rich in love... [God] doesn't treat us as our sins deserve... As high as heaven is over the earth, so strong is [God's] love...” (Psalm 103:6-18)

The Jubilee Year was meant to be God's “reset” button, to restore the world to the way God intended it to be from the beginning.

And, can you see how close this concept of the Jubilee Year is to what Jesus is saying in today's Gospel? The Holy Spirit has anointed him to bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind; to let the oppressed go free; and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. And this would not happen 50 years in the future! “Today,” Jesus says, “this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” Today!

Now, at first glance, that statement seems absurd! For, clearly, what Jesus was anointed to do has **not** been fulfilled – not then, not today! There are *still* people held captive, still blind people who have not recovered their sight, and not all of those who are oppressed have been set free – far from it! It would seem that Jesus doesn't know what he is talking about when he says, “**Today** this scripture has been fulfilled.”

But, let me suggest that Jesus' statement makes sense if we take it in its entirety. What he says to the people in the synagogue is, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled *in your hearing*.” In your hearing.

Now, in the ancient Jewish mindset, reflected in the Hebrew language itself, “to hear” was not simply to have soundwaves vibrate on one's eardrums. It was far more than that! To “hear” meant to listen to what was being said **and respond to it**. In fact, the Hebrew word “*dabar*” means both “word” and “deed.” God's word and the corresponding action of those who hear it should be inseparable. Jesus himself says, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear!” (Matt. 11:15) What he is saying is, “*respond* to what I am saying; don't just let it go in one ear and out the other.”

Commenting on today's Gospel, John Shea writes, “The prophesy [of Isaiah] is fulfilled *in their hearing*. **If** they have the capacity to receive Jesus and his message, the prophesy will be fulfilled. A better world will come about. But if they do *not* have the capacity to receive Jesus and his message, the prophesy will *not* be fulfilled. Their capacity to hear is essential to the fulfillment of the prophesy.”<sup>1</sup>

**Our** capacity to hear is essential to the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy, Jesus' mission, today.

Now, here's the thing: Bible historians tell us that they cannot find any historical evidence that the wholesale forgiveness of debt, freeing of slaves, and relief from poverty prescribed in the law of the Jubilee Year was ever put into practice. You see, we humans tend to want to have debts *repaid*, not forgiven; we tend to think that if people are in bondage, it's their own fault and not our problem; and if people are in poverty – well, they should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. In other words, the reason that Isaiah's prophecy of forgiveness, restoration, and freedom – Jesus' mission statement – has **not** been fulfilled today is because Jesus' mission is only fulfilled *in our hearing*.

And yet, there is hope that God's kingdom might still come on earth as in heaven! For we continue to come here, week after week, to gather as the community of Christ Church; to hear Jesus' teachings about forgiving 70 times 7, loving our enemies, loving God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourself. We read much these days about the demise of the Church; and yet, where else are we going to hear Jesus' Inaugural Address, hear Jesus' mission statement and his call for us to participate in its fulfillment? Where else but within the community of the Church, the Body of Christ in this world, in this place, *today*?

AMEN

1 John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 33