



“Fulfilled in Your Hearing”
A Sermon for Northminster Church
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Preached by Zachary Helton
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Luke 4

¹⁴ Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

¹⁶ 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, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “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,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ 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. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus was filled with the power of the Spirit, and that’s what carried him back into the world after his time of spiritual wrestling in the wilderness. You might be familiar with the story of Jesus’ temptation in the desert – our passage today comes just on the heels of that encounter as Jesus returns to Galilee and begins teaching in earnest, earning a reputation in the region.

Then, on a long weekend maybe, he decides to travel back to his hometown, to Nazareth. It's a sweet homecoming in all the ways a homecoming can be sweet – he gets to eat at his favorite restaurant, pops in on his next door neighbors and gets to meet the children that have been born in the intervening years, goes for a stroll down the main city street and stops in to chat with the merchants in whose booths he played hide & seek as a child. Then the sabbath rolls around, and though he was in a familiar place, I imagine Jesus felt an unfamiliar sensation as he got dressed and headed toward the synagogue; there was a weight of responsibility on him that he could not ignore. He knew that these people who had watched him grow up would be eager to hear from him, to experience for themselves rabbi version of himself they had heard so much about. On the other hand, he knew it would be easy for them to discount the things he said, to write him off as youthful and naïve. "Better make it crystal clear, then," he thought to himself, "lest there be any confusion as to what it is I'm about."

He chewed on this feeling all the way to the synagogue. When the time came he took his place on the steps and read from the scroll of Isaiah about the prophet's sense that the Spirit of God was moving him toward a proclamation of good news for the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed, that the Spirit was ushering in a new era when God's reality would be the only reality humanity would know. And then he sat down in the pulpit, as it were, to begin his teaching as the congregation waited with bated breath. The first words out of his mouth: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It might have been nice if Luke had deemed it worth sharing with us what Jesus said after this mysterious opener, if he'd chosen to include the whole sermon Jesus preached. Sure, would've made my job easier today. But he didn't. And so, we're left to wrestle with it ourselves, to wonder what it meant – first, that Jesus chose this as the passage he would read here, in this moment, in his hometown; and second, that he would claim its fulfillment right then and there, in their hearing. So, let's try to put ourselves in the room, take a good look around, and try to watch how the people react.

"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I imagine a few folks in the congregation chuckled nervously as they looked from side to side, trying to catch a neighbor's eye, ready to exchange some raised eyebrows and questioning looks. "Today?" they thought. "You're telling me this is the moment we've been waiting for? You're going to tell me Isaiah had this little rinky-dink synagogue in mind when he imagined the ushering in of the year of the Lord? Nah. Not today. Not here. Not with these people." Can you see them?

Many of you know Zach and I dated through college though we were in different states several hours apart. On several occasions Zach would come down to visit me during his spring or fall break, and rather than skip class to be with him I just invited him to tag along. (I think it says more about him than it does about me that he agreed.) On one such visit he had the privilege of joining me in a class where we were discussing the advent of the postmodern era – this seismological shift in the entirety of western culture that some would say we're actually still in the midst of right now, as we speak. I won't get into the details of all that the shift from a modern, enlightened age to a postmodern age entails – although I do think there are some important implications for the church – but for the sake of my story, let's just suffice it to say we're talking about a big change, macro-level change: the turning of an era.

What I remember most vividly from this episode of the Academic Adventures of Zach & Claire is not so much the revelation itself that this cultural moment we had been born into was one of significant change; what I remember is that when we got home to Pensacola that weekend we shared our newfound knowledge with one of our dads – I'll leave it to your imagination which one since I love him dearly but forgot to clear this story with him. And rather than marveling, as I had, he responded with disdain, dismissal. "Surely not," he said. And that was that.

It was as if, to him, the idea that this could be a future-altering moment was almost conceited; we were giving ourselves too much credit. "Today is not the dawn of a new era – it's just Saturday."

And who knows? He may turn out to be right, though that's beside the point. But I do think his reaction is not an uncommon one. Sure, none of us loves to be confronted with the prospect of change, but there's something else at work here. Put yourself in the shoes of those listening in the synagogue. Really? Today is the day the scripture is fulfilled? If you're telling me something big is about to happen here, there is a good chance I'm going to be required to play a part in it, and that's just not what I signed up for.

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Anyway, I imagine they weren't the only ones scoffing at Jesus. Let's keep scanning the room.

"Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I imagine there were some folks whose heads cocked when Jesus uttered the word, "fulfilled." With newly sparked hope and a fair amount of trepidation they dared to wonder, "What does he mean, fulfilled? Have our hopes possibly come true, or does he believe we have reason to hope that they might? Is it possible that God has not forgotten the promises we were made so many years ago?" The expression on their faces was one of hopeful anticipation; they wanted their hopes to be confirmed.

But as Jesus continued with his sermon – I'm just making an educated guess here – I imagine if we kept scanning the room, we would watch as their faces fell, as it dawned on them that this man had lost his sense of who his people were. He was totally uninterested in all the issues that concerned them. What they wanted to know was how they were going to get out from under the thumb of the Roman Empire. This was the question of the day, and rather than answering it, Jesus seemed to say, "Face it. If it's not Rome, it's still gonna be somebody. All this time you've spent looking into which political group you ought to back...I won't say it's wasted, but these kingdoms – they're not like the kingdom of God."

The kingdom of God is like...well, that's a much longer sermon – Jesus had a lot to say about what the kingdom of God was like. But I can tell you what it's not like. It's not like the power of Rome. It's certainly not like the superpower of the United States. It's not even like the restored kingdom of our ancestor David. In a week like the one we've had, when the pitfalls and shortcomings of our current governmental system are made so abundantly clear, it's as important as ever that we remember that we follow a teacher who was rejected by his own nation and executed by their oppressors as an enemy of the state. Our fidelity to the way of Christ must be the ultimate claim on our lives, or else he's likely to turn us around and send us on our way back home.

Let's glance around the room once more.

“Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This last group – I don't know if their reaction could even be discernible at all from the outside. These are the ones who noticed the hairs on the back of their necks standing up at the words, “in your hearing.” Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Now maybe it was because they had fallen into the habit of tuning out while the scriptures were read because they seemed so irrelevant – so the first task was to rewind and try to remember what scripture he had just read, to figure out what exactly had been read in their hearing, so they'd know what it was that he claimed was being fulfilled. Oh, that was it – the good news for the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed. Release. Healing. Freedom. Jesus, they thought, we hear this all the time; there's no shortage of calls for justice in the writings of our prophets. What does our hearing it today have to do at all with the actual fulfillment of the prophet's vision of a brighter tomorrow?

Perhaps we might ask ourselves the same question.

I'll play my hand here; it may be obvious this is where I find myself in this story. In my reading of this passage I can't bring myself to read it as “today this is fulfilled in your hearing,” as in,

lucky you – what timing, you got to be one of the few who were here when the fulfillment came about.

Rather, I believe that what we have to take away from the Jesus story as a whole is not that this text was fulfilled but that it *is* fulfilled each time one of us hears it – truly hears it. And the test of whether we've really heard it or not is pretty simple: are we setting people free? Are we loving people into healing and wholeness? That's how we can know the Spirit of God has truly come to rest upon us.

There are some of us who may be on the other side of the equation, needing to be set free, needing to be loved into healing – of course, we all encounter both sides of this equation in our lives. But the good news for you is that what's waiting for you on the other side of this present trial is not just healing and freedom – sweet as they are when we find them – but purpose: the purpose of picking up the torch, or the cross, and carrying it for another who needs you to walk alongside them.

We read earlier in the service from the words of St. Paul to the church in Corinth, encouraging them to remember that they are all parts of the same body. No part is more or less important than another, we each have a role to play in bringing the body of Christ to its full realization, to fulfillment. There is a quote often attributed to St. Teresa of Avila, a 16th century Christian thinker, that says, "Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, yours are the hands with which he blesses all the world."

No matter where you might have seen yourself in the synagogue that day, let me affirm some things. Something big is happening, and it is happening now. *Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. It won't be finished today, and this gives us purpose as we move into tomorrow. Today, this scripture is *fulfilled* in your hearing. Somehow it is fulfilled and yet it is not the fulfillment of any of the structures of this world in which we place our hope; our political

parties, even our charities and non-profits; they will ultimately let us down and so this too gives us purpose as we move into tomorrow, as we attempt to identify the places where their aims are in step with the purposes of Christ, which is where our allegiance ultimately lies. And finally, today this scripture is fulfilled *in your hearing*. Yours. Your ears have been graced with the gospel of Christ: the good news of release, of healing, of freedom. Go now, and let this gospel find its fulfillment in you, the body of Christ in our world. May the Spirit of God see with your eyes, listen with your ears, speak through your lips, serve with your hands, and walk with your feet to all the places in need of the good news of God's gracious and all-encompassing love.

Amen.

Communion Transition:

In Christ we are one; we are one in the body of Christ.

As members of Christ we must feel it all the more acutely when he speaks of the breaking of his body.

Let us enter into that moment not for the sake of the brokenness but for the sake of the healing and redemptive love that wait on the other side.

We remember together...