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# “A Mission to Light Your Way”

A SERMON on Luke 4:14-21 for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C  
Preached 23 January 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister  
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“My church is a beautiful waste of money.” This was the confession offered up in an article a few weeks before Christmas by Melissa Florer-Bixler, a pastor in the Mennonite tradition serving a congregation down in North Carolina.<sup>1</sup> “What we do,” Pastor Melissa wrote, “will look like a waste of time and money to the broader order of utilitarianism. We sing together, we share bread, we tell stories.”

And indeed, as she goes on to say, in church, “we take time—we *take* time—to worship”<sup>2</sup> and we give away money, often to places that could be considered lost causes and to “people who don’t register as productive and good citizens.”<sup>3</sup> Pastor Melissa is even forthright about the reality that in her church, like in most churches, “by far the most expensive part of my church is me, the pastor”, even though one could argue that very little she does as pastor couldn’t also be done by others around her congregation.

Pastor Melissa certainly isn’t the first to make such observations about the seeming lack of concrete utility in what we do as church. It’s been a little over 20 years since a book about Christian worship appeared with the title “A Royal ‘Waste’ of Time”. And I’m sure it goes back even further, through the decades and perhaps even centuries, with plenty of others pointing out that so much of what we do as church could be considered “wasteful,” or at least “illogical,” by the world’s standards.

So, why do we do what we do? Why do we come together—usually in-person, of course, but even through the wonders of technology—why do we come together to do the things we do as church?

I would argue, my friends, that we come together as church because we want—or, no, more accurately, we *need*—for the same sort of thing to happen for us as happened when Jesus stepped into his hometown synagogue so many years ago. And that “thing” that happened back then, that “thing” that we need ourselves today, it was all encapsulated in one word, that very first word Jesus spoke after reading the scripture: “Today.” Today.

As we heard Joyce and Minjae tell us as they each read our gospel passage this morning from Luke, near the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry as Luke tells the story, Jesus came on down to the synagogue in Nazareth, his hometown, on the Sabbath as was his custom. Although Luke indicates that Jesus has already begun to teach in some of the synagogues around the region, this appearance at Nazareth is the first one Luke shares about in any detail. We don’t know whether it was because he was a special guest or because helping lead things had been part of his

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<sup>1</sup> Melissa Florer-Bixler, “My church is a beautiful waste of money,” *Faith & Leadership*, 30 November 2021, <https://faithandleadership.com/my-church-beautiful-waste-money>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

routine before, but in either case, Jesus is the one who gets invited to read the *haftarah* that day, the second scripture reading in the service, meant to accompany the appointed Torah portion, a passage typically taken from the Prophets. That day, the *haftarah* comes from the book of Isaiah, and so that's the book he is handed. He finds the passage<sup>4</sup> and then reads: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor .... to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." He hands the scroll back to the attendant, and then as was typical practice he begins to offer a commentary, an interpretation, of the text he's just read. That is to say, he begins to "preach."

This sermonic debut at the hometown congregation, however, is quite brief and to the point. Really, it's just a simple mic-dropping statement: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today. Even though he has read ancient words, from a prophet who first spoke to generations long, long passed, in the gathering, the speaking, the hearing, something present, something real, something *here and now* and *living* is taking place. Today. Not the past. Not the yet-to-come. Today.

Debie Thomas, who is a lay minister in faith formation at an Episcopal church down in Palo Alto, California, recently reflected on this, writing:

I realize how reluctant I am at times to embrace the holiness of "today." Perhaps like some of you, I have spent the past two years 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,*" I tell myself. Real life will resume when church services go back to being in-person. When we can celebrate the Eucharist with bread *and* wine. When we put away our masks for good. When we get some sort of handle on climate change, police brutality, teen depression, and sectarian violence.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, though, as she points out elsewhere in her essay, "Both [of the] stories [we've heard this morning] end with an invitation to recognize the sacredness of the present moment. Both stories insist that when we seek the divine—in worship, in the reading of scripture, in the intentional gathering of the beloved community—*today* shimmers with the presence, the blessing, and the favor of God."<sup>6</sup>

Gathering together as we do, sharing the stories that we share, meeting with the very presence of Christ in words spoken and water poured and bread broken... these things somehow, through the power of God's Spirit, speak one powerful word to, and for, and through us: Today. Today we are loved. Today we are powerful. Today liberation comes. Today our mission of love and justice is clear. Today God is here. Today.

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<sup>4</sup> It is not at all clear from the Luke passage whether the passage Jesus reads from Isaiah was the *haftarah* reading appointed for the service by some form of schedule or lectionary, or whether the specific passage was one of Jesus' own choosing. Although I am, for the purposes of this description, implying the first of these two scenarios, either is easily supported by the Luke text. Ultimately, which one of the two scenarios actually happened is probably of little importance.

<sup>5</sup> Debie Thomas, "Today", *Journey With Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church*, 16 January 2022, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3299-today> . Emphasis in original.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis in original.

And being able to hear such a word, and know it to be true beyond all measure, is no waste at all, my friends.

The poet and pastor Michael Coffey writes:<sup>7</sup>

*Yes, you can look back at all the clouded midnights  
and the miserable poor who overflow  
the urban cups of containment  
and the blind and lame and deaf who  
bump and toddle along next to all the  
eyes and legs and ears never scarred  
and sob for past imprisonments that cannot be redeemed*

*Yes, you can look ahead to the dreamy day  
when all is well and all shall be well  
and the present day hipster cynic  
will be crushed by joy and released from dire irony  
and then sit there and grieve the time gorge  
between then and this sorry now  
and fall into the groove of post-everything sarcasm*

*Or, you can look into now and see the glory  
hidden in the cracks and fissures of reality  
a paucity of light, yes, but still seeping through  
glory in the poor who manufactures joy from nothing  
glory in the blind who make their way just fine thank you  
glory in the deaf who make tacit words you wish you could hear  
glory in the locked up who discover inner sovereignty  
glory in the one word spoken you've never wagered on  
today is the day and liberation is now  
and not even your ferocious doubt  
or lingering melancholia can disable it  
but your surrender to its unmitigated truth  
collapses all of time into this eternal munificent is*

BLESSING AND HONOUR, GLORY AND POWER BE UNTO GOD, NOW AND FOREVER. AMEN.

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Coffey, *Mystery Without Rhyme or Reason: Poetic Reflections on the Revised Common Lectionary* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2015), 128-129,