



The Feast of St. Luke: St. James October 18, 2020:

LUKE 4:14-21

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 favour." 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."

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In her book on using Jewish teachings to raise children, author Wendy Mogel speaks of the importance of Jewish thought for today's generation.

This is what she says at the end of her first chapter:

"There is one question that sums up everything I have learned about the power of Jewish teaching to guide us in every generation. It's a question that rabbis like to ask schoolchildren:

"What's the most important moment in Jewish history?" the rabbis ask.

"The giving of the Torah on Sinai?" the children answer. "No," say the rabbis.

“The parting of the Red Sea?” the children answer. “No,” say the rabbis.
“What’s the most important moment in Jewish history?” the rabbis repeat.
“Right now,” they say. “Today is the most important moment in Jewish history.”

Luke, our Gospel writer for today, feels the very same way. The word “today” appears twelve times in Luke, compared with only nine times in the other three gospels combined. It is in Luke that angels, telling the shepherds of Jesus’ birth say, “Today in the town of David a Saviour is born to you.” It is in Luke that Jesus, encountering the tax-collector, Zacchaeus, tells him, “Come down immediately. I must stay in your house today,” and later, “Today, salvation has come to this house.” It is in Luke that at the crucifixion, Jesus tells the thief hanging next to him: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” And finally in this morning’s text, a text that occurs early on in the 4th chapter of Luke, Jesus gets up in the synagogue, reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and then pronounces: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Today is the most important time in Jewish history, the rabbis say. Today is the most important time for Luke’s Jesus, and, yes, today is the most important time for us not only in these times but in all times.

For some reason learning to focus on living today is one of life’s most elusive lessons. Maybe it’s because we’re easily distracted. Maybe it’s because we have too much on our minds these days. Or maybe it’s because as human beings, we can both remember the past and imagine the future.

We, of course, often see and experience these capabilities as a gift. We experience the gift of memory in the wisdom and sense of identity it gives us. We experience the gift of imagining the future in the inspiration and drive we receive when we envision what is not here yet. But both these capabilities can also be bandits—stealing the importance and invitation of the present moment from us. The past can hold us in its thrall, through our inability to let go of the memory of past hurts or of past glory. And imagining the future can turn on us: becoming worry and dread about what might happen or simply fantasies that keep us from dealing with the reality of the present.

And so I love it that, after reading the passage from Isaiah in the synagogue, the first word out of Jesus’ mouth in the Gospel of Luke is “today” for it pulls his listeners away from escaping either into the past or into the future, placing them squarely and solidly in the present moment.

Today the scripture is fulfilled in our hearing:
Today the captives have been released.
Today the blind have been given their sight.
Today the oppressed have been freed.
Today God’s favor has come upon us all.

Whatever could Jesus have meant by this? And for that matter, whatever can Jesus be meaning today as once again we hear the story of this bold declaration? For we look around us and we still see prisoners and captives; we look around us and we still see the blind, we look around us and we still see people those who are oppressed, those who seem to us to be separated from the blessings we associate with God.

Given this, it would be easy to believe that what Jesus says about the prisoners and captives being released, the blind regaining their sight, the oppressed being freed, and God’s favor coming upon us

all, it would be easy to believe that none of these things are really be true. It would be easy to believe that they were and are instead simply the assertions of a young Jewish man, who, like the rabbi I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, simply believed that today is the most important moment of Jewish history.

But what if the one reading the scroll of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue that day was more than just any rabbi? What if that one were the fabled and longed for Holy One of God sitting that very day, that very moment, in their midst? What if, in our hearing this story once again, God has come among us today, come to redefine how we think about ourselves today, come to redefine how we think about captives, prisoners, the blind, the oppressed and those seemingly lacking the blessing of God today? And what if God come among us in this story has also come to redefine what you and I are capable of choosing, are capable of doing today: telling us that though we are in prison, we have the capacity to act with the dignity of one who is free, that though we have physical limitations or disabilities, we have the capacity to live and move with the dignity of the able bodied, that though we are held captive by every manner of societal constraint, by every manner of painful history, yet we are capable of choosing paths that support and express not only our own dignity but the dignity and freedom of others?

And so the story of Jesus, the Holy One of God, who reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah and pronounces that what he has read has been fulfilled today, is not a story of an immediate change in all the physical or societal conditions that produce poverty, captivity, imprisonment, and blindness. Rather, the story of Jesus is the story of God proclaiming the immediate presence of God's powerful dignifying love for us and bestowing upon us the capacities that this dignifying love gives us—both for our own sakes and for what we can do in and for others in this world.

And so we are blessed and challenged by this story of Jesus in Luke's Gospel. Blessed because the story describes what God has already done in the coming of Christ Jesus: God has taken on our flesh and stood in our place when we were captive, blind and oppressed and given us back our dignity. And we are challenged in that God needs us to take this thing that God has done in Christ and through us to quicken it, to enact it, to make it more visible in the world.

And this, of course, is especially important in these times of pandemic and racial unrest. For we are challenged to renew our imagination, our ability to see that world as a place where God has already acted to release the prisoners, God has already acted to open the eyes of the blind and God has already acted to free the oppressed. And we are challenged to rededicate ourselves to play our part in making these same actions of God more visible in the world through us today in a time when many of us are just focussed on making it through another day.

Jewish thinker and writer, Abraham Joshua Heschel, once wrote that Judaism does not ask followers to take a leap of faith; it asks them to take a leap of action. This, I believe, is part of what Jesus is emphasizing in reading from the prophet Isaiah and in pronouncing that "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus is inviting us to take a leap of action trusting that, in Christ, God has already acted first.

We, you and I, can take that leap of action today. We can. For the gifts we yearn to give to the world—compassion, justice-making and peace—are the gifts we have already been given.