



Third Sunday after the Epiphany: January 24, 2016
St. Alban's, Richmond
The Right Reverend Melissa Skelton

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 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."

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Wendy Mogel in her book entitled *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*, 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 next) "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 Savior 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.

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. Or maybe it's simply because we are human beings and part of being a human being is that we, unlike other species, 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 dread about what might happen or simply pie-in-the-sky dreams that keep us from dealing with the reality of the present.

And so I love 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.

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 many with physical disabilities, we look around us and we still see people who seem 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, and God's favor coming upon us all, it would be easy to believe that none of these things could 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 rabbis I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, simply believe 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 was 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 and those seemingly lacking the blessing of God today? And what if God coming 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 physical and mental constraint, yet we are capable of choosing paths that support and express our own dignity and the dignity of others.

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 external conditions that produce poverty, captivity, imprisonment, and blindness. Rather, the story 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.

And so, people of St. Alban's, today the Holy One of God is once again among us. Today. Today, the liberating and dignifying love of God has come among us to take us to himself and to remind us again of who we really are. Today. And today the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, our memory and our imagined future, has filled up the present moment with the opportunity to act now as God's own liberating and dignifying love in the world. Today.

