

January 23rd, 2022

Third after Epiphany, Year C

Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12: 12-31a

Luke 4: 14-21

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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."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two weeks ago our gospel told us of the baptism of Jesus, and we talked about beginnings, baptism not as an end but a beginning, our call not to know all or be ready, but simply our willingness to begin.

Today's passage occurs right after Jesus has been in the wilderness for 40 days facing temptations from the devil.

And now we find Jesus back in his home territory of Galilee and making his first attempts at teaching, and his early reviews are great! Lots of praise for his wise words in the synagogues.

Then Jesus goes home, to Nazareth, where he grew up. And he quickly finds out that indeed, you can't go backwards, you can't go home again.

At first the hometown folks are excited to see Jesus; they come to the synagogue to hear him speak. He is handed a scroll to read from Isaiah, but instead of preaching, Jesus says today these ancient words are "fulfilled in your hearing".

His neighbors are at first impressed, but quickly move on to, isn't this Joseph's kid, and then naturally move on to running Jesus literally out of town.

Like all of us, Jesus's neighbors had come to worship for a bit of inspiration, a bit of hope, a little challenge, but they, and we, are not prepared to have our world upended. And Jesus upended the world in his hometown.

Jesus told them today is big, today the earth is shaken on its foundations; this passage from ancient Isaiah is not just thought-provoking, it is unleashed; it is fulfilled today, and in YOUR hearing.

The theologian Verity Jones explains what Jesus has told the folks in his hometown about him, and them:

The passage that Jesus reads, Isaiah 61:1–2, describes the year of Jubilee, when it is promised that crushing debts will be forgiven and captives will be set free, injustices turned back and equity reset. Furthermore, in some communities Isaiah 61:1–2 was understood as a reference to the Teacher of Righteousness—the Messiah—who was to come. Jesus’ proclamation that “today this scripture has been fulfilled” identifies him as the one they have been expecting for centuries.

The neighbors and old friends of Jesus cannot escape his words, they cannot un-hear them. This is not an ordinary day, we can’t smile and leave the synagogue and tell folks that young man Jesus did a pretty good job, and then forget the whole thing.

We heard God’s word fulfilled and now we either ignore God’s word, or we change. Yikes.

This passage for me is painful, almost an indictment, because.....I have to confess, I have found myself lately yearning for, almost aching for....

Not the fulfilling of God's word, but instead I have been yearning for.....an ordinary day, especially an ordinary Sunday. I find I am deeply pandemic weary.

Almost two years ago I recall preaching that we had to resist our yearning to "go back to normal" after the pandemic ended, that God is always going forward, our God is a God of the future, and we can't put all our dreams into the past.

I said that after the pandemic ends in 2 months.....in 6 months.....in 12 months.....in a year and a half.....in 2 years.....

We will not go backwards and heave a sigh of relief and get BACK to doing things the way we always have. I preached over and over that we can't go back.

I confess now, I'm done, I'm so tired of changing and rearranging and re-working and pivoting. I just want to go back to ordinary, predictable days, of course kidding myself that any days are predictable, but still, I know what I yearn to go back to what I remember as ordinary, easy days.

Listening to colleagues close to home and far away, gives me the comfort in knowing that I, that we, are not alone in this pandemic weary yearning. Katie Hine-Shah a Lutheran pastor in Illinois, wrote this in Christian Century:

Way back, almost two years ago, we imagined what a return from COVID

would look like in our churches. The pews would be packed. Offering plates and Sunday schools would be full. Mission projects would be successful. We would all be singing.

We were so naïve.

Most of us have returned to in-person gatherings, but they aren't exactly the grand events we'd envisioned. Vaccine hesitancy, breakthrough infections, overcrowded hospitals, and limited treatments changed our plans. Some people are not yet ready to come back; others have lost interest in organized religion. Some moved away or even died. To be sure, new members have joined our congregations, too. But most churches have experienced decreased attendance, less money in the offering plate, fewer children, and more questions about how to return from our COVID exile.

It's a good thing God's people have been here before.

Oh! How I want easy, ordinary days, but we are God's people in our Covid wilderness, and yes, like Jesus was tempted, we are tempted in the wilderness by visions of an unreal past.

The devil tells us too just trust in me, and I'll get you back to ordinary days, where nothing shakes you or challenges. Don't worry about that Jubilee stuff HE preaches. Just get back to doing things the same old ways, keep it familiar, keep it easy, and I'm right there with you.

I'm not much of one to preach about the devil, but I know temptation, I know complacency, I know the evil of ignoring the suffering of God's children when I see it.

So, I can sigh, and you are welcome to join me, I and we can look longingly

towards that mythic ordinary Sunday, and then we can pull ourselves together, and get going.

Get going to our baptism and our beginnings, to hoping, praying, knowing that indeed, today this scripture is fulfilled in OUR hearing. Knowing that we are called not to put things back together as they were, but to follow our savior and brother, our beloved Jesus, into the waters of baptism, into the wilderness, and follow him onward to the cross.

Yes, to follow Jesus means not yearning for what we want, but looking for how we are called as this always changing and always evolving and always bursting-forth new vessel of God's love called the church, in this amazing mess of a world.

Amen.
