

3rd Sunday after Epiphany
Sermon 1.26.25

Luke 4:14-21

Then 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.” (189)

You’ve been given all the power in the world, say. You decide to use it. You’re gonna go nuts with it. Make a big splash. Bring good news to the poor and freedom for the oppressed. Proclaim release for the captives and healing for the suffering, recovery of sight for the blind.

Go nuts.

Not everyone would go nuts in quite that way, as this week has taught us all too well. All the power in the world: some would use it enrich themselves or to glorify themselves. Some, maybe most (I don’t know) would use it to draw every last drop of attention to themselves or use that power to garner more power. The thing with power, you can never have quite as much as you really really want—or so I’ve been told. You can always have more.

Jesus is now filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, which people following the story Luke tells would find not at all surprising. He’d been conceived by the Holy Spirit, which was announced to Mary by an angel. He’d been announced to the world by a host of angels, filling the night sky with their glory and singing among the stars for an audience of shepherds below.

As he grew, the story is eager to tell us, he became strong and filled with wisdom. Every year, his family would make the long trip to the Temple for Passover and one year Jesus stayed behind, with the rabbis and teachers, not telling anyone except after the fact that of course he would linger so long in his Father’s house.

Once grown, he received of John’s baptism and then was led by the Spirit to the wilderness. There he faced temptations about what he’d do with all that power, how he’d manage his access to it and to what service he would put it. Like, would he use that power to garner ever more power (control the masses with miracle-made bread, amaze the masses with shows of spectacular amazingness, simply kiss the ring of the one who doles out such diabolical power) or

would he resist and withstand and walk away, but not before preaching a word of truth to one who might well have squirmed and scowled at the sound of a simple counterpoint.

Following all this, this time in the wilderness of temptation where there was the chance to really visualize all that now was possible—possible with all this power—there’s this most haunting statement in all of scripture, if you ask me: “When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.” Meaning one would come: an opportune time. Meaning there’s always to come some opportune time for temptation to suggest its way into what might happen next.

It’s not useful to imagine the diabolical as personified, “the devil’ per se. It might indeed be harmful, or at the very least goofy, to imagine the divisive as embodied—horned, cloven-footed. It’s easy to make fun of these once-scary images, the now-seeming cartoonish results of earnest attempts to get our hands around what’s destructive, which, how else do we imagine it? But what haunted the imaginations of the White settlers of Salem , for example, now just make us laugh in the cartoons of *The New Yorker*.

That said, I think it is useful to anticipate a certain specificity to what tempts division and destruction. There can be a specific moment when some new possibility arises, something corrupt or crooked and cruel but with some certain benefit for you, and you either take up that moment or you turn away from it; some specific moment to risk the good and the true, or to be captured by the self-serving and justifying, to your own glory, to your own benefit, to save your own skin. The devil doesn’t show up with his forked tongue and tail, but there might be some particularity worth being sensitive to and perceptive of. An opportune time opening up and something of menace stepping in. We are wise, if you ask me, to watch for that, to resist that and withstand.

Meanwhile, Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee, and began to teach in the synagogues and was praised by everyone.

Turns out, this praise of the crowd was fickle. an earthly power more fickle than the divine favor Jesus also enjoyed. All too soon this adoring hometown crowd would turn on him and try to throw him off a cliff. More on that next week, maybe.

As for now, Jesus would rise and read a passage from scripture that was poignant, if also provocative.

The 61st chapter from Isaiah comes to us from late in the exile, the people forced into Babylon, late in the exile when going home, to Israel, to Judea, was clearly going to happen. The scroll Isaiah, what is to us the book Isaiah, is a long one, the longest book of prophecy in the Bible.

It's also likely not the voice of one prophet but of at least three and from three different moments in the life of the people.

The first third of Isaiah speaks from prior to the exile, early in Babylon's attack of Judea, destruction of Jerusalem, and desecration and devastation of the Temple. The horror of so many becoming war booty, now brought into this foreign land and culture, the horror also of many left behind to die alone amidst all the destruction: First Isaiah gives voice to all of this.

Second Isaiah speaks from during the exile, when the people were denied their freedom and their sovereignty, were made to live amidst Babylon, which was a discordant combination of enforcement if not enslavement, some certain wellbeing, a certain freedom to live and to make a living, to marry and even intermarry and make families, though not on the people's own terms, the yearning to go home never abated.

Third Isaiah speaks from when going home was going to happen, rebuilding home was the people's next challenge. It's from this portion of the book that the prophet can truly speak as we just heard Jesus read: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." See, now was the time when the people could renew in hope. Now was the time when release was likely, and recovery was possible. It would happen!

It did happen.

Five hundred years later, it would happen again, an unleashing of that divinely ordained liberty now meant for the entire world.

That Jesus was handed this scroll: it isn't clear whether he requested it or whether this was the given scroll for that Sabbath day. And within this scroll, it isn't clear whether Jesus chose these chapter and verses or whether these were the ones intended for this day. I don't know how readings came to be heard on any given Sabbath in any given synagogue. Maybe there was a liturgical calendar and maybe there wasn't. Certainly, there had long been a Jewish liturgical year, but how this played out when it came readings in the synagogues, I don't know, and I don't know whether it is known.

What I do know is that Jesus heard these words anew that day and meant for others to hear them anew as well. "Today," he said in conclusion of his reading, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

It's a bold conclusion, to say the least—to identify so absolutely with the prophet who said these words, to hear in ancient sacred text the frame and heart of your life and purpose. It's also a wondrous thing—for someone newly revealed to have all the power in the world with which to do whatever it is he wants to do—to choose to pursue: this.

This, all the more so when you consider Jesus left off in the middle of a sentence his reading from the scroll. This is what he read, the first portion of the final sentence: “he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...” But this is how it reads according to Isaiah, “...he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God...”

Which I can imagine sounded good to the people. After fifty years of humiliation living in Babylon, it would likely feel good to have their god exact vengeance. Their god was the more powerful one than all the gods of Babylon, after all. Certainly, their god could finally have a win. It probably haunted them all these years, come to think of it, the wondering of why they suffered so long as history's losers, this when their god as the creator of it all, and moreover they were the favored nation.

Vengeance! Who doesn't want that?

Who isn't worthy of that?

The thing is, if everyone deserves their moment of vengeance, then vengeance will be the all in all and we'll never get on to the next thing. The hope of the future. The hope and promise and challenge of the future.

The reading, of course, it goes on from there, lists more aims in that list of aims. Comfort for all who mourn, gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. But the mention of vengeance is there in the same sentence, such that not including it seems intentional. But so, Jesus did, not include it: the day of vengeance for our God.

And I don't know how familiar this phrasing would have been to the people in the synagogue that day. I don't know if that leaving off would have struck their hearing in any way at all. Like, “Roses are red, violets are blue. Sugar is sweet...” Or like, “We will, we will...” Does this leaving it off speak louder than if it were said? I don't know.

Really, I don't know how crucial vengeance is when apprehending the nature and righteousness of God.

Or how crucial it might have been—for it was not to be any longer. Judging from this mid-sentence leaving off, vengeance is no longer at the heart of the promise, is no longer one of the satisfactions of living faithful to a righteous God.

We'll have plenty of opportunities to wish it might be otherwise. The injustice we will witness at foot in the world will be galling. The untruth testified to will exhaust us in its demand for cognitive dissonance. Corruption and incompetence will scandalize. Capitulation to worldly power will be more gross and plain than we've seen in a century. Our hope will be as that ancient people's hope, that the cruel humiliation of exile will pass with as little harm done as possible.

Meanwhile, ours is the mission that Jesus took up in the first days of his ministry. We of his church are simply to do this: bring good news to the poor and healing to the suffering and freedom for the oppressed, same as it ever was.

Onward, Christian fools in faithfulness: we have work to do.

Thanks be to God.