

January 26, 2025

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Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10 & Luke 4:14-21

*Who is Jesus? One Who Fulfills Prophecy*

As we continue to explore the person and work of Jesus in this season between Epiphany and Transfiguration Sunday, after a brief foray in the Gospel of John last week, we will be hearing the story of Jesus' ministry through the words of the Gospel writer Luke for the rest of this season. Each of the Gospel writers has a particular lens through which they share who Jesus is. Today's scripture is a wonderful encapsulation of the lens of Luke. Some scholars consider today's passage to be the response to what is known as *Mary's Magnificat* – the song Mary sang upon her cousin Elizabeth's recognition that she was to give birth to the savior of the people.

Mary sang: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for the Lord has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name, indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the aid of his child Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Hear now from Luke 4 how this prophecy that Mary sang while Jesus was in her womb, is fulfilled by the words of Jesus' himself:

Then Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding region. 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 set free those who are oppressed,  
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."

**The Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.**

How does one begin a public ministry? Jesus has been baptized in public by John and is now ready to begin sharing the Good News. In the days before social media and making your life transitions “*Facebook* official” or humble bragging about the new tunic and sandals on *Insta* or *What’s App*, Jesus needed a way to communicate to the world (or at least his little corner of it) that he is ready to roll. I should note that in our Sunday morning scriptures, we have missed a little piece of the puzzle – after his baptism, the Holy Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting, temptation and preparation for the work that lay ahead. We will spend time during Lent “in the wilderness” with Jesus, but for now suffice it to say Jesus is as prepared as he can be to begin his ministry.

Like an author with a new book, Jesus goes on a speaking and teaching tour throughout Galilee and gets some great press along the way. So he comes home to Nazareth to have his hometown share in the glory. We will see the response of the community next week in the second half of the scripture (spoiler alert – it is not all positive!). For this week, though, we focus on how Jesus identifies himself and shares to what he has been called.

As I related in the Children’s Sermon, scrolls were the “Bibles” of Jesus’ day and, the Torah, the prophets, and the writings were written on scrolls that were unfurled and read in a particular sequence in the synagogue or temple. It is a bit like our lectionary, where a specific text was assigned for the day. And Jesus came to Nazareth at this particular time to read this particular text. We hear Luke say: “[Jesus] 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. After he reads the text, Jesus sits down, the traditional posture for a teacher. As one scholar has noted: “The passage he’s just read, he explains, shouldn’t be heard only as the words of Isaiah long ago and far away. They should also be heard as Jesus’ own words here and now, applying to him directly, right before their eyes. It’s as if he says: *The Spirit of God is upon me, sitting here with you, right here, right now. God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. And that Great Jubilee you’ve heard about, that long-awaited year of the Lord’s favor? I’m here to tell you: it’s begun! Today — today, in your hearing! — this scripture has been fulfilled!*”<sup>1</sup>

Has been fulfilled. It is important to understand that the term “fulfillment” does not mean Jesus has completed the work set out by the prophet Isaiah and revealed by the Holy Spirit to his mother Mary. Scholars note that the idea of fulfillment is better understood that “Jesus *embodies* [the scriptures’] essential ideas and energies. He reprises them, crystallizes them, incarnates them, “fulfills” them. He fills them out, like an arm sliding into a perfectly tailored sleeve”.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Salt Project. Jubilee! SALT’s Commentary for Epiphany 3 (Year C): Luke 4:14-21. January 21, 2025. Online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/1/23/jubilee-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-epiphany-week-three>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

In this, his inaugural address, Jesus tells all who will hear (and even those who may not want to hear) who he is and who he will be serving. In Luke's gospel Jesus is the God of the reversal. Jesus may be a king – however, it is not the powerful he has come to partner with. It is not those who those who will seek favors from him, not those who are looking to lord their status over others. No, God has anointed – chosen and blessed- Jesus to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. And to bring the Great Jubilee to the people and the land. The Jubilee year was a time referenced in the Old Testament book of Leviticus when enslaved people would be freed, debts cancelled, the land allow to lay fallow. It was a time of resetting and renewal.

Jesus' inaugural address is about the new creation he is called to usher in – to embody – to fulfill. It is an inaugural address that speaks to the power of liberation and restoration for those who have been trampled on by the power of the empires – empires that oppressed the people through military intimidation, failure to pay just wages, fraudulent taxation practices, and through perpetuating a hierarchical society that allowed those at the top incredible benefits and those in the middle and on the bottom to struggle for survival. The Gospel writer Luke has a lot to say about the lack of “shalom” peace, harmony and wholeness in the society to which Jesus brings his ministry. Jesus fulfills the prophecy by overturning the expected, flipping the script, and calling for a new creation.

This is similar to the place we find the priest Ezra in the reading from Nehemiah that Ron shared. The community where Ezra and Nehemiah are leading is fragmented. Conflict and dispute reign about the best ways to address the return from exile and the process of rebuilding. Internal disagreements are tearing apart the community. The identity of the people has unraveled following the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory. They have lost their center of gravity with the destruction of the great Temple Solomon had constructed. They want to go back to the “before-times” – before the Babylonian conquest, before the exile, when life was “normal”. But they are not the same people and the world is not the same place. Ezra recognizes that to re-center themselves, they need to begin with God. He organizes a time of worship and a reading of scripture. And the people recognized the power in the words of the beloved Torah or law. They recognized the holiness of their time together worshipping the Lord God and that the joy of the Lord is their strength.

Like Jesus in Nazareth, Ezra recognized that this was a “kairos” moment. In the scriptures, there are two kinds of time referenced – using the Greek words “chronos” for chronological time or calendar time. And “kairos” which is a qualitative, rather than a quantitative time. It is a season, an opportunity. As I share in the Words of Preparation by theologian Kelly Brown Douglas: “A kairos time is a right or opportune time. It is a decisive moment in history with the potential for far-reaching impact. It is often a chaotic time, a time of crisis. Yet it is a time in which God is fully present, providing an opening, a way to God's future. ...”<sup>3</sup> This is where

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<sup>3</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas. What does it mean to be a Christian in these times? *Christian Century*, February 2025; Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/voices/what-does-it-mean-be-christian-these-times>

Ezra found himself on that day – trying to rebuild a community not only decimated by external forces, but struggling to voice their common identity amidst divisions deep and wide. Jesus found himself in kairos moment as well. It was time, it was the right time for him to proclaim his mission and ministry. He had been baptized, he had drawn closer to God through his time in the wilderness, he had begun traveling and sharing God’s word around Galilee. It was time to declare that he was the one God had promised to send to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.

In the letter to the Ephesians (1:22-23), the apostle Paul shares that God has put all things under Jesus’ feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him. We, the church, are Christ’s body here on earth following Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension. As the body of Christ, we are called to fulfill the words of prophecy spoken long ago, so we too find ourselves in a *kairos* moment in our world today.

“What does it mean to be Christian in this time?” asks theologian Kelly Brown Douglas in an article in the February issue of the *Christian Century*. She says that this is an urgent question we must ask. “Yet the answer is simple: we have a cross at the center of our faith, and we need to start acting like it. The cross demands that we join in God’s eternal mission to create a loving and just world ... This divine mission must become our human mission. We are, therefore, called by the cross into a human/divine partnership to cultivate a world and society where the sacredness of all God’s creation is respected and where all people—without exception—can live freely and fully into the abundance of life that God promises.”<sup>4</sup>

I echo Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas’ words. Jesus focus on caring for and the most vulnerable, is our call as the church as well – every person of faith is called to open our hearts in generosity and service. The Spirit of God is upon us, sitting here with all us, right here, right now. God has anointed us to bring good news to the poor – to share our resources with those who are housing and food insecure and to work toward equitable access for education and health care. God has anointed us to bring release to the captives and to sight to the blind – to be a healing presence in the midst of conflict, to restore those separated from community 0 the lonely, the less abled, those afflicted by diseases and addictions. God has anointed us to set free those who are oppressed. To walk with and support our refugee, asylum seeking and immigrant neighbors fleeing oppression in their homelands; our LGBTQ+ siblings fearing for their safety as they simply live their lives as people created in the image of God; for people of color whose ability to live freely without discrimination is threatened by racism.

“What does it mean to be Christian in this time?” It means *God has anointed us to usher in that long-awaited year of the Lord’s favor. It is in our hands to fulfill this prophecy.* It may be a chaotic time; it may be a time of crisis. And yet, it is our time to be the body of Christ in this world. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid*