

Epiphany 3 (C)
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Text: Luke 4:14-21

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On three consecutive days this week, I ended up having conversations with people who observed how others they knew didn't seem to be handling the most recent developments of the pandemic very well. They reported friends showing signs of strain, or anxiety, or depression, and it was clear that recent events were wearing on them. One friend I spoke with was mystified by adults acting like toddlers in desperate need of a nap, raging about how they won't wear a mask and won't let anyone impinge on their freedom. That would be really scary, dealing with a 40-year-old throwing a temper tantrum! I imagine that all of us are feeling at least a little challenged, or depleted, maybe worried, or frustrated, or disappointed. So I wonder whether Jesus' words in our gospel story today might be genuinely welcome, with power to lift our hearts, and soothe our spirits, and strengthen our spines to meet this challenging season we live in.

It was the Sabbath day, and Jesus went to worship in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth. He was invited to read and teach from the scriptures. The people were all wondering what their famous home-town boy was all about. So Jesus chose a passage from the prophet Isaiah: "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." For the gospel of Luke, this serves as a kind of programmatic statement for what Jesus' work is all about, and for a lot of people these words express for them the heart of what Christianity is all about. And this morning, as we hear how Jesus' words spoke to the needs and hurts of people in his time, perhaps we can feel the power in his words address us and our time.

First, Jesus says the Spirit of God has sent him to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives. In first century Israel, the overwhelming majority of people lived with poverty and malnutrition, and a primary cause was excessive taxes and tolls and tithes paid to Rome and to the temple. One bad year's harvest could plunge a family into debt, causing them to lose their land. The captives Jesus spoke of were those sent to debtor's prison, who could only get out if relatives pooled their resources to pay off the creditors. Good news would be having enough to eat. Good news would mean not being afraid of losing your home. Good news would be release from the grind of poverty and debt. The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts picture Jesus building that kind of alternative community, where there is sharing and mutual support, so that everyone has enough. Jesus is creating a society where the lives of

people who are not powerful or wealthy, people without high status, matter every bit as much as their wealthy and powerful neighbors.

The economy of our world is different in so many ways from that of the first century, except we still see poverty and debt, and a tiny fraction of people amass obscene wealth while many barely scrape by. And Jesus still brings good news, in practical ways. For example, at Rose Haven, women and children can come off the street and be treated with dignity, share a meal and receive medical care or clean clothes. Through Lutheran Community Services, people without a house can transition into a stable living space. Jesus is also bringing good news by helping people really see each other across social and economic barriers, see each other as neighbors instead of strangers. Sometimes, when I'm tempted to a very dark view of where we're headed as a society, I need to remember that Jesus is still at work among us to transform and restore human community. That is good news. The Spirit of God sent Jesus to bring good news to the poor.

Secondly, Jesus says that he was sent to bring recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free. As he traveled around Galilee, two things Jesus was known for were healing and casting out demons. The gospels tell several stories of Jesus as a healer giving sight to the blind. But those particular miracle stories also function as a metaphor for the whole of Jesus' work as a teacher. With his words, with his parables and stories, Jesus opens our eyes to how God showers us with grace and compassion, so that we can treat each other with grace and compassion. He opens our eyes to recognize God's mercy and forgiveness, so that we can forgive those who have hurt us. Jesus opens our eyes to be able to see every person as a child of God, to see that God loves them just as God loves us. When we can see only ourselves and our own wants and desires, Jesus opens our eyes to a whole wide, beautiful world of neighbors.

In addition to healing, Jesus also was known for casting out demons. And again, those particular exercises of spiritual power function as a metaphor for how Jesus continues to let the oppressed go free. With his gift of forgiveness, he sets us free from sin and guilt and condemnation. With his promise of hope he sets us free from fear and despair. With his call to follow him in his way of forgiveness and compassion and generosity, he sets us free from bitterness and greed and entitlement. In our lives, and through us for the sake of others, Jesus is still giving new sight and new vision. And to all whose lives have been weighed down and constrained, Jesus is still giving freedom and new life. The Spirit of God sent Jesus with good news, to give sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free.

Finally, Jesus comes to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This is a reference to the Jubilee year, a provision in the Law of Moses that every 50 years, slaves would be set free, debts would be forgiven, and if a family had been forced to sell its ancestral land, that land would be returned to its proper owners. It was all about right relationships. I mean, we know what wrong relationships look like, but the Jubilee year was a way to protect the most vulnerable from being driven into permanent poverty, and prevent the powerful from accumulating huge wealth. It was about justice. It was a matter of restoring right relationships so there could be security and stability for all. Here's what's really interesting about the Jubilee year. There isn't much historical evidence that Israel ever really practiced the Jubilee year—setting slaves free, forgiving debts, and returning ancestral land. Apparently, the wealthy and powerful were more interested in keeping their wealth and slaves and extensive land holdings. But the people never forgot. It stood as an ideal and symbol of what their life with God would ultimately look like. And they began to think about the Jubilee year as a promise for the future, when, in the fullness of time, God would restore God's people and deliver them from their enemies.

So when Jesus announced the year of the Lord's favor, I can imagine that the ears of everyone there were tingling. And ours should be tingling too. Jesus invites us to learn from him what right relationships really look like. Jesus makes our relationship with our Creator right so that we can pursue right relationships with each other. Right relationships between rich and poor might result in less concentrated wealth and less poverty. I wonder how we might get there. Right relationships between white people and people of color might result in rearranging privilege and power. It might result in relationships being repaired—perhaps including something like reparations. I wonder how we might get there, to live in right relationships. The Spirit of God sent Jesus with good news, to announce the year of the Lord's favor.

After reading from scripture, Jesus' teaching was remarkably succinct—"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Good news to the poor and release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free, the year of the Lord's favor—the promised gift of God for the restoration of God's people was happening at that very moment, as his listeners heard him speak. And what Jesus began 2000 years ago is still happening every time the risen Christ speaks to us through the scriptures and every time the community that bears his name embodies his way of forgiveness and compassion. It's happening right now, because the same Spirit that animated Jesus' work in Galilee is present here to work through us to bring healing and hope to God's weary, wounded, beloved world. Thanks be to God. Amen.