

## **Sermon Text – Sunday, January 26, 2025 – Pastor Paula Kraus**

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 9-10; 2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: I Corinthians 12:12-31a  
Scripture for Message: Luke 4:14-21 – “Spirit Led”**

Our readings during this season of Epiphany firmly establish who Jesus is and what he came to do – the scripture we just read is the beginning. Typically thought of as Jesus claiming his mission and ministry – his purpose for coming to us. This comes in Luke’s chronology after the Spirit descends upon him at his baptism and after Jesus returns from his forty-days in the wilderness. Scriptures tell us that the Spirit sent him into the wilderness for forty days where the ‘devil’ tries to tempt him. You would think that his time in the wilderness would drain his energy, but Luke writes that Jesus is filled with the power of the Spirit. He returned to Galilee to teach in the synagogues and because of his teachings, people everywhere praised him. But then he comes home, home where people knew him, home where he could find perspective and clarity, home to where it all started, Nazareth of Galilee.

What Luke writes about Jesus returning to Nazareth, where his family raised him, indicates that there was a period of separation. That separation from his hometown might even have been longer than the forty-days he was wandering in the wilderness. Regardless, Jesus, on the Sabbath, goes to the synagogue as was his custom. He was without question a man faithful to his religious beliefs. His actions, as Luke describes them, were deliberate, giving us a sense of drama in the scene. He stands, takes the scroll handed to him, unrolled it, and located the desired passage. He knew what he was going to read and after reading it he reversed his actions – he rolled the scroll, handed it back to the attendant and sat down. All eyes were upon him, customarily the reader would give some explanation or teaching regarding the reading, and I wonder if they were waiting for the “so what” from Jesus. His statement was, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The people would recognize the scroll Jesus read as announcing a year of Jubilee – which from the Torah is the year all debts are forgiven, all slaves freed, bad real-estate transactions redeemed – a year where all-bets-are-off. The people listening to Jesus were more than likely waiting for him to tell them how this was going to happen. How had this scripture been fulfilled in their hearing? Notice that Jesus did not say “will be fulfilled” but that TODAY it has been fulfilled. He was referring to himself as the one who would bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. They were, however, still living under oppressive Roman rule, possibly John the Baptist was still captive in

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Herod's prison and the Jewish leaders hadn't practiced a year of Jubilee in centuries – so what Jesus.

I assure you we will get to how his hometown congregation responded to this statement next week. I want to focus on today, so let's consider how we would or how we should respond to Jesus' message. In this season of Epiphany our scriptures illuminate who Jesus is, who God is – the scriptures and Jesus himself reveal God's glory. When Jesus reads this scripture in his home synagogue, he reveals something about himself. Something they should have known – would have known if they could listen and understand.

Our Elder this morning read from the Old Testament book of Nehemiah – we heard how Nehemiah and Ezra read the Book of the Law of Moses to the people. We heard too that Nehemiah appointed Levites to instruct the people in the law while the people were standing there. As this was happening, as they opened the scrolls, read, and explained so the people could understand them, the people wept and mourned because they realized how far they had strayed. Finally, the law had meaning for them and with meaning came conviction. This was a community coming home, in exile they experienced injustice and oppression from the hands of their captors, and they sought healing and reconciliation in their homes. Their homecoming allowed them to remember who they used to be and gain insight into who they had become. Nehemiah's words to them gave them the encouragement they sought, and he reminded them of God's holiness and presence with the words – “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” They understood this and the reading and explanations revealed to them the law and scriptures.

The people Jesus read the scroll to did not get the message – they were waiting for Jesus' explanation, but it didn't make sense to them. He reveals, to those who would listen, the fulfillment of the prophecies. In his ministry Jesus used his power from God, his gifts, to fulfill God's purpose. Jesus would be the one to do all these things and the fulfillment of scripture would be evident to those who would listen. Jesus is the evidence of God's glory, and he is the evidence and fulfillment of the scripture's promises. Jesus gives them the evidence that the Messiah has come to them, but those who thought they knew him best didn't get the message.

How would we respond to hearing Jesus' message in that synagogue? Would we be like the people of his hometown waiting in silence for his explanation? Would we, like the people of Nehemiah's time, weep and mourn at hearing the words? There is always a “so what” when the congregation waits for the meaning in the message of scripture. Someone must be ready to help the people understand – at least for those who will listen, and not all will.

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So what? There is a key to this, a key that enables our understanding, a key that gives Jesus the confidence to stand up in his hometown congregation and proclaim the fulfillment of prophecy? Notice how our scripture reading from Luke's gospel starts out – Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit . . . The Spirit is key! Jesus obtains his “power” by the Holy Spirit, and he gives the people evidence of what he will do, the evidence of who he is as God's own son. Jesus is God's agent and openly states that when he claims, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

So, what does this mean for us? The spirit enables our understanding of scripture, and the spirit enables our response to Jesus' statement of mission. The church is, we are, the evidence that Jesus is the Messiah, and how others understand Jesus is up to us. Paul, in his first letter to the people of Corinth explains how the spirit enables us to be members in the body of Christ. As one bible scholar writes, “We are permanently part of the living Son of the living God whose membership in the divine fellowship is as indelible and as intertwined as is our membership in him.”<sup>1</sup> Meaning to me that as Jesus is part of the divine fellowship with the father and the spirit, we are intertwined in that fellowship with him, and through him. In that fellowship, our response to Jesus' mission and ministry is to follow Jesus. Jesus defined his purpose, through his reading from the scroll of Isaiah, as bringing liberation and healing through his ministry.

We might think Jesus' mission is exactly what we ought to be completing for the world. But Jesus waited for the spirit to fill and renew him, he told his disciples after his resurrection and ascension to “wait” for the spirit. Therefore, I think it is important for us, as individuals and as a church, to ensure our mission and ministries are spirit driven. Yes, our purpose is to follow Jesus, to be more like him in our lives – but Paul is correct in saying that the body does not consist of one member but of many, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose. We are not alike; we are not all gifted alike. Churches are not alike nor are they gifted alike. True gifts of the Holy Spirit will serve the whole community and in turn will serve the world – we must wait, however, for the revelation of the true gifts of the Holy Spirit.

According to Jesus' mission, the church – not just individuals within it – should identify with the marginalized, serve others, reject injustice, and subvert domination. But we don't have to be doing what other churches are doing. We let the Spirit guide us within the context of a loving, authentic, and inclusive community. Loving not judging, authentic and sincere. God's plan will work out –

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Cauthorne Crafton. “Luke 4:14-20: Theological Perspective.” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Vol 1*. eds Cynthia Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson. WJK. 2014. Print. 98-102

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if we are spirit led in our plans and wait for the spirit's inspiration, God's plans will become our plans.

Luke was careful to tell us that the spirit filled Jesus as he began his ministry in Galilee. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus taught and gained praise and popularity. Jesus himself acknowledges the spirit in his selection of and reading of the scripture – “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” Therefore, the church seeks to follow Christ in mission and ministry, and the church recognizes what Paul writes that each of us as members of the body of Christ have roles and responsibilities. Not all roles and responsibilities are the same, but all are equally important, there is no hierarchy within the body. I think what Paul writes in his first letter to the people of Corinth says it all – each part, everyone within the body is necessary and needed.

We recognize that God loves everyone, and God's plans are to restore and reconcile all of creation to God-self. Given that, as the body of Christ, one role is to care for creation and each other as God would, “the members may have the same care for one another” treating each other with equal compassion and respect. When Jesus came to his hometown and opened the scroll in the synagogue reading that passage in particular – he was proclaiming that the prophecies were fulfilled in their hearing today, not someday but today.

As the body of Christ, animated by the Spirit, everyone has a contribution to make to Jesus' mission – today. Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. The body is needed to instruct and encourage as Nehemiah and Paul encouraged. The body is needed to carry the good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free. While we, as individuals, may not be able to do these things we as a community of believers can do what is needed to facilitate the moving forward of these ministries. We can pray for organizations like the Gideon's whom we learned last week carry the good news of the gospel to all parts of the world, we can support various organizations with our giving of money or tangible donations such as food and clothing. We can support each other by praying for the names on our prayer list and by praying for the whole body of Christ.

We can use our gifts, whatever they may be, to continue Jesus' work toward the fulfillment of the prophecies, and to tell the story of Jesus. Establishing God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.