

Epiphany 03 C 2022  
January 23, 2022 :: Luke 4:14-21  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *“Declaration, Promise, and Invitation.”*

While looking at today’s gospel reading, a word grabbed my attention, and it was the word “today.”

Because when Jesus has finished that reading from Isaiah, and he sits down to preach, he doesn’t then say, “The Scripture *has been* fulfilled in your hearing,” or even “The Scripture *will be* fulfilled in your hearing.” Rather, he says, “*Today*, the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today.

What do you suppose Jesus meant by that? Because, and by all appearances, on that day in first-century northern Palestine, it probably would not have seemed to anyone that what Isaiah had proclaimed and predicted had come about. So, what’s going on?

Maybe, Jesus was simply announcing that, *in his very person*, God’s promise through Isaiah of liberty and grace and healing for all — but especially for those who are most vulnerable and in need — is made manifest. Maybe it’s simply that.

Or, maybe his brief sermon was all about himself, about the living Word of God who had come to dwell with us, to be God-with-us, to be a living and breathing fulfillment of God's promise to rescue and redeem all, especially those standing in the shadows and on the margins.

Or, maybe, the word "today" isn't a static term, but rather a far more dynamic word, as in "Today is just the beginning." Because, as it turns out, in the original Greek text, the grammatical tense of Jesus' declaration that "the Scripture has been fulfilled" isn't in the once-and-done present tense, or in the singular past tense, but rather it's in the ongoing, even repetitive, and definitely re-occurring *perfect* tense.

So Jesus is kind of saying, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled — and continues to be fulfilled, and will keep being fulfilled, and therefore will keep needing to be fulfilled — in your presence."

Which strikes me as kind of an important word for us today. Because by all outward appearances, God's promises through Isaiah *still* haven't been particularly or obviously fulfilled in our world right now either.

But the perfect tense of the language of Jesus, allows us to see his words simultaneously as three different things. First, as a *declaration*: that is, in Jesus, God acts on behalf of those in need. Second, as *promise*: that is, God will continue to take the side of the vulnerable. And, third, as *invitation*: that is, *we* are being called to this same work of embodying, manifesting, and fulfilling God's declaration and promise. Wow! It's hard to get all this from the English translation. But there is it: declaration, promise, and invitation.

Truthfully, I think I'm more comfortable with the declaration and the promise, than I am with the invitation. However, the challenge that I hear in our gospel is that we're invited *to be more explicitly invitational*. As in "You're invited to be part of the fulfillment of God's promises. Today. Tomorrow. And the next."

Admittedly, that invitation can be daunting, leading us to a variety of self-doubting questions: "Me, us, really? Have you been paying attention? All of those problems seem so big!" But the invitation can also be empowering: "Me, us, really? We can make a difference? That God is actually at work in *our* lives and in *our* relationships for the sake of the world? Cool!"

Well, one source I like to turn to for ideas and insights on our gospel reading, referred me to Howard Thurman's wonderfully challenging and equally empowering poem "The Work of Christmas." And though we are a month beyond our celebration of Jesus' birth, the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany seems like just the right time to share it with you. So, here it is, "The Work of Christmas" by Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:

to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.

So, in the end, Jesus' shortest sermon on record, also turns out to be his most challenging. But if we dare to accept his invitation, I believe we will find that the work set before us will be satisfying, fulfilling, and even life-giving. And as Christians, that's the way it should be.

Amen.