

Fulfilled

January 26, 2025

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

Luke 4:14-21

The four Gospel writers had a common task – to help their readers understand the nature and significance of Jesus the Christ – but each had different notions of how to go about it. All four chose a different way to describe Jesus' entry into ministry after his baptism and the gathering of his first disciples.

Last week we heard John's version. He told the story of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding in Cana, the first of his signs. What did it signify? Jesus' power, yes, but also his compassion and his abundant grace.

Mark, probably the first of the Gospel writers, had a similar idea. He focused on Jesus' healing ministry to begin his account. Matthew took some time, lingering over the stories of John the Baptist and the forty days in the wilderness, before giving us the words of Jesus in what we call the Sermon on the Mount.

For Luke, the best way to introduce Jesus was to hear him read these words: "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 then to hear him say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The quote came from the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah. Five hundred years before Jesus, the grandchildren of those taken into exile in Babylon read those words and took heart that they might be able to return to Jerusalem. They were the captives; they were the ones oppressed. They hoped and prayed for a year in which God favored them.

Their prayers were answered. The Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, who felt no need to retain custody of their former enemies' former enemies. The reading we heard from Nehemiah this morning is the account of a celebration held in the rebuilt Jerusalem. It was the people's rededication to their faith, a day which brought such a range of emotion. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "It's an astonishing image of a communal Bible reading experience that takes a diverse group of people on a journey from attentiveness to comprehension to affirmation to wonder to grief to worship to joy to celebration. I read it over and over again with an aching sense of need, desire, and envy. When was the last time I read

the Bible with such sustained attentiveness and expectation? When was the last time I savored the sweetness and the sorrow it contains?"

In the reading of the Law, the people of Jerusalem affirmed their identity as people of God.

Jesus, likewise, chose to identify himself with this reading from Isaiah, speaking in the synagogue of his childhood. Karoline Lewis asks at Working Preacher, "What would be the words that could sum you up? How much are you willing to reveal about yourself, to the world, to others, even to yourself? I know it's Jesus, but still, these are bold words. You want to know who I am and why I am here? Well, here you go, and no euphemistic, metaphorical, or figurative hermeneutical gymnastics allowed. What if Jesus really means what he says because it says who he is?"

Bold indeed. Jesus declared that his ministry would be one to bring good news to the poor. He would proclaim release to the captives. He would bring vision to the blind. He would set free the oppressed. He would proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

That message went over well. For a bit. The next sentence in Luke reads, "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." Not to give anything away, especially because I believe Rev. Weible may preach on the next part of this story next Sunday, but it went downhill from there. I admit that Jesus said some rather pointed things, but by the end of the story, the people with whom he'd grown up wanted to push him off a cliff.

I guess that's what happens when you ask people for mercy.

As you know, this is my last Sunday leading worship before beginning a three-month sabbatical. I can make a case that this is following the example of Jesus. Just before he spoke in that synagogue in Nazareth, he'd spent forty days on a wilderness retreat. A sabbatical is sort of my wilderness retreat, though I hope to avoid lengthy encounters with the Tempter during it. It is a time to prepare for resumed ministry. As for why it will take me eighty-eight days where it only took Jesus forty, well, I'm not Jesus.

I almost cancelled the sabbatical. I strongly considered it after the election results in November. I anticipated then that we were in for some very hard times, and I didn't and don't want to abandon you in them. I told the Council this, but I also told them that I'd decided to take the sabbatical. The simple truth is that we've gone through a lot these last eight years and my reserves are getting pretty thin. I do think we've got rough times ahead and I need to be at my best to get through them with you. I ask for your prayers that I can be the pastor you need me to be.

Just so you know, I will be guided by these words of Jesus. I will speak good news to the poor. I will call for release for the captives. I can't do much about blindness of the eye, but I will do my level best to increase the vision of the heart. I will shout for liberty for the oppressed.

These are the things that make a year of the Lord's favor.

May they be fulfilled in your hearing.

I was not going to speak about events this week. There have been a flurry of actions of which I disapprove, things that I think are bad policy, things that I think are potentially catastrophic in their folly, things that I think will cause great harm to people. If I am guided by these words of Jesus, I will have a good deal to say about such things over the next few years. Oh, yes. But I thought I'd let it wait. It was enough, I thought, to reflect on the implications of Jesus' adoption of Isaiah's commitment.

I thought I'd let it wait even after hearing the words of the Rt. Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde. Bishop Budde does not need me to supplement her or explain her. She preached the Gospel. She said, "In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country who are scared now."

She asked someone to have mercy. I don't need to add anything to that.

But House Resolution 59 has been introduced to the House of Representatives. It has two "be it resolved" clauses:

"(1) it is the sense of the House of Representatives that the sermon given at the National Prayer Service on January 21st, 2025, at the National Cathedral was a display of political activism; and

(2) the House of Representatives condemns the Right Reverend Mariann Edgar Budde's distorted message."

To be clear, the House has not yet passed any such resolution. It's been introduced and referred to committee.

She asked for mercy.

They said, "No." Not only that, they're claiming that the mere request for mercy, delivered by a pastor from her own pulpit, is political activism and a distorted message. This is literally a branch of government seeking to define what is true religion.

Maya Angelou wrote in *Letter to My Daughter*, "My dear, when people show you who they are, why don't you believe them? Why must you be shown 29 times before you can see who they really are? Why can't you get it the first time?"

Jesus told us who he was: one who would bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, vision to those who would not see, liberty for the oppressed. Jesus told us, and Jesus fulfilled it before the people of Nazareth, of Galilee, of Judea, of the world.

This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Bishop Budde did the same. She asked for mercy. This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Please God that when I'm back with you, I will bring good news, calls for release, vistas of vision, and the promise of liberty.

May this scripture be fulfilled in your hearing.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson