

Fulfilled
Luke 4:14-21 and I Corinthians 12:12-31
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Practice sacred imagination with me for just a moment as we hear the text again. Jesus stands in a place where he stood so often in his life. The listening audience knows him, knows his parents, has watched him for years. But now they're hearing rumors about him as a powerful teacher, a Spirit-filled presence. Maybe some of them are more skeptical than curious. The ones who have heard him teach are trying to convince the others that he's as remarkable as his reputation touts. Perhaps a few are whispering to one another of this report spreading around the country. The room falls silent and everything becomes completely still when he is handed the scroll. Then he reads:

"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."

He rolls it back up again, hands it to the attendant, and sits down—never breaking eye contact with the congregation. No sound returning. No movement stirring. Then he breaks the pregnant silence to add:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

What's happening here in this moment? Listening audience on the edge of their seats. Room so quiet you can hear the inhale and exhale of breath. Hometown boy rises to read words of prophecy. And those words are being fulfilled in that very moment. Are they being fulfilled in him? Are they fulfilled because Jesus the Christ is holding the scroll and reading of good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed? Are they fulfilled because he took on the good news and repaired all the broken places of this world?

The exegetical work of Mark Davis and Gail O'Day will help us to understand that the words of the prophet Isaiah have "been fulfilled in the act of reading/hearing...it would have been entirely different if Jesus had said, 'This Scripture is fulfilled in me.' Instead, he points to the preaching moment - the moment when the folks heard the words proclaimed - as the point at which Isaiah's augmented words were fulfilled. Without any attempt to take away from the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, I wonder: If

someone had read Isaiah's text twenty years before in that same synagogue, might it have been true then also that the Scriptures were being fulfilled in the hearing? (There might have been a little boy, Mary and Joseph's child, who experienced this.) If someone were to read these words 2,000 years later, might it also be true that the Scriptures are being fulfilled in the hearing? I wonder if the 'Today' of this story," Davis considers, "is a singular moment in history or the 'eternal now' of when the word is fulfilled through proclamation and hearing."

Something is shifting in that room that ripples out not just through the town but through time. The interaction of speaking ancient words in a living place, receiving prophetic words with listening ears, transforms them to a moment of fulfillment. Here, O'Day's work notes a shift "away from Scripture as static and the interpreter as a consumer and toward the creative interaction of text, context, and interpreter."¹

Do you hear what they are saying? This isn't just reading scripture as a performance piece for a consuming audience that receives the words as well-read, perfectly articulated, deftly projected. The words of the prophet are alive across time, still pulsing and waiting to be heard and received, dangerously alive and fulfilled only as they engage the active imagination of a listening congregation to embody them.

We've talked and talked about what God means.

We've read a whole lotta scripture together.

We know the words of the prophet.

Now's the time to live this out.

We're putting our bodies and money and time and energies and whole selves into this message. We are embodying it. We are giving our flesh to it-incarnating it.

We are bringing good news to the poor. We are setting captives free. We are giving sight to the blind. We are shutting down oppression. This is what God's favor looks like. This is what gospel sounds like. We are giving our lives to this and living it out right here and right now.

These words are fulfilled in your hearing.

¹ D. Mark Davis, <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/01/handed-over-and-given-back.html>

Now next week, we'll read on to Part II of this story and hear how the listening audience receives this reading. But for now, let's hold off on that and embrace the message Jesus is communicating here as that ancient word from Isaiah is fulfilled in Galilee and then fulfilled again right here on St. Charles Avenue. These words are fulfilled in your hearing.

What are we gonna do with that?

We are in a transition point at St. Charles where everything is about to pivot. The congregation we have been for over 120 years is becoming something new while still rooted in the best and strongest of who we have always been. We've asked the questions about where we imagine ourselves in 5 and 10 and 20 years, and now 2019 will be the year that we allow our answers to take action as we live into the next decades of our story here. Some things will change. Some ways of doing will be released to the pass. Structures and bylaws and practice will be streamlined to support the emerging call of who we are as we live out the fulfillment of the ancient words of scripture.

We are clear that we are called to embody something here, not just receive words as a consuming audience, but to give our lives to something big, something specific, and something real. We understand our faith to be dynamic and progressing, not just moving our own individual lives forward but forming us into a collective, a people, a community who is then working not just for the dynamic, forward movement of our own little world in here but for the whole, wide world around us—a comprehensive flourishing, God's shalom, good news of God's favor.

We know we are a community that aspires to honor God by asking questions, seeking justice, loving neighbors, and welcoming all. We live out those aspirations together through meaningful gatherings, vital conversations, and collective impact. The result of embodying that focused, called identity and work together is establishing ourselves as a center for progressive faith and purposeful action. We are living into a calling, living into a participation in the good news of God, living into our role in this world as gospel bringers who upset the systems of oppression, of perpetual stuckness, of systemic blindness. Everything we do here will go through that lens—from the personal, devotional study and growth, to the congregational balance of play and service, and the broader partnerships for the good of all. I think the fear of organizational change is a deep, quiet, personal question: Will I have to change, too? Will I have to be something and someone else to fit in here? Will there be a place for me in this system or is that just for someone else? The absolute true answer is that growing into this new part of our story will require each of us and all of us being fully

who we are—alive, whole, passionate, true—for the whole body to take shape. We need each one of you to be here, fully you, just as you are, growing into the very best of who you are, in order for the whole community to grow as one body.

Much earlier in worship we read from I Corinthians chapter 12 and heard Paul's famous image of the church as a body of many parts. Foot, hand, ear, eye, each is necessary to the functioning of the whole. Much of what is significant about this teaching is not simply the words as they appear in our Bibles all these years later but the words held up against similar metaphors during the time Paul was writing. We need to understand that context for today's hearing to be fulfilled.

Professor of New Testament Brian Peterson explains, "The image of the body as a communal reality is not unique to Paul (though Paul is the only writer in the New Testament to use it). Other writers in the Roman world (especially politicians and philosophers) used the same image. Most often, it was used to support the social hierarchy (whether of the family, or the city, or the empire as a whole). The point was that every body needs a head, and in society that was provided by the wealthy, the rulers, and the elite. Every body needs hands and feet to do the hard and dirty work, and that was provided in society by just about everyone else. Paul, while drawing on the same image, turns the point in a very different direction. The unity of the body does not, in fact, mean that the less honored members get abused and treated roughly; rather, all the parts belong to one another, and therefore the 'weak' parts are treated with special care. The end result of the body metaphor in Paul's hands is not the same old hierarchy, or even the inverse of that culturally-expected pattern of domination with new people placed on the top, but a deep unity of the whole body, with each part cared for by the others."²

In this body, everyone matters, every part contributes to the whole, and no one person is more valuable than another. Paul's teaching here is not just about a bigger understanding of who God is and how God works and moves but is a bigger understanding of who we are in relation to one another AND in relation to God. In a fulfilled hearing of this word, our very communities will be shaped differently than the way the world around us shapes communities, and we must be awake and aware of our calling, if there is any hope of us getting it right. This new thing God is doing in us will reflect a holy unity, an anointed calling, honored relationships, and transformational action. We will embody this. We will live this out right here. Together. Today, the scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing. This is the word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God. Amen.*

² http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2733