

Sermon for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany    January 24, 2010  
 Delivered by the Rev. Margaret Bullitt-Jonas    Grace Church, Amherst, MA

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
 Psalm 19

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a  
 Luke 4:14-21

### Fulfilled in your hearing

I like a good story, and I have been trying to imagine the Gospel scene that we just heard. The setting is a synagogue, but we don't need to imagine a special building with distinctive architecture -- buildings like that weren't built until the later second and third centuries.<sup>1</sup> In Jesus' time, synagogues were simply gatherings of Jewish families who came together in private homes or sometimes in public halls in order to pray and also to hear and discuss their sacred texts. Every town and village in Palestine had its own synagogue, which functioned as the center of the community's life and worship. So we can imagine the space however we wish -- maybe it was someone's home, or a large hall.

What interests me more than the setting is who was gathered that day around Jesus in the synagogue. What sort of people do you imagine were there? I like to imagine the room being filled with people not so different from ourselves. I like to imagine there being a young man in the crowd, a rather shy and serious fellow just setting out in life and wondering what on earth his goals should be and to what he should devote his best energy and time. I like to imagine that an older person is seated there, maybe a woman who has given her life to many a good cause but who by now is feeling somewhat beaten down -- despite her best efforts, there is so much that she hasn't been able to change in the world, so much ongoing injustice, so much waste, so much misery and want. I like to imagine that there is a person there who feels grief or loneliness or guilt, and someone who feels emotionally stuck, and someone who is physically unwell. I like to imagine that somehow, in that small room, the whole range of humanity has gathered, and that there is room enough for us, too -- that we, too, can slip into the scene and bring with us whatever is on our hearts this morning -- we who contemplate the vast misery of the people in Haiti, we who may feel anger and frustration at this country's current state of affairs, from its broken health care system to the appalling prospect of corporations pouring unlimited amounts of cash into political campaigns. In this synagogue where Jesus is about to speak, surely there is room for us, and for everything we bear. If you were in the synagogue that day, what would you bring with you? What

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to the Bible*, Howard Clark Kee, et al., Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 458.

longing or need would you feel most strongly as you gathered with your fellow seekers to pray?

Let's turn now to Jesus and let him enter the scene, this man who was baptized just weeks before in the Jordan River, who heard through the power of the Spirit that he was deeply cherished by God, and who, as Frank Griswold puts it, "with the voice from heaven still ringing in his ears,"<sup>2</sup> was driven by that same Spirit out into the wilderness to face his temptations and to renounce any self-centered patterns of thought or behavior that might pull him off course. By the time that Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, he had discovered his deep identity -- he was the beloved of God -- and he had purified his intention to give himself freely and fully to the service of God.

"Filled with the power of the Spirit" [Luke 4:14], as we heard in today's reading, Jesus returned from his forty days in the wilderness, and began teaching in the synagogues of Galilee. "When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom" [Luke 4:16]. It is clear that Jesus was a faithful Jew who shared in the liturgical life of his community. Synagogues generally did not have professional rabbis; instead, the person presiding at the service asked some respected person in the congregation to speak. Jesus was invited to teach that day, and so our scene unfolds.

The men and women of the congregation watch as he stands up and receives the scroll. They watch him unroll it and find a passage from the prophet Isaiah. They listen as he reads it aloud, and we can imagine the sound of his voice as he reads the text, the authority and urgency and purity of his 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 let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" [Luke 4:18]. The congregation watches as he rolls the scroll back up, hands it back to the attendant, and sits down -- as was the custom of the time -- before he begins his sermon. The eyes of all in the synagogue are fixed on Jesus as they wait in silence for him to speak.

What does he say? It is perhaps the world's shortest sermon: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" [Luke 4:21]. Believe me, if I could have gotten away with it, I would have simply spoken that sentence from the pulpit this morning and sat down. Obviously I decided not to do that. But can you sense the shock of energy that was released around the room when Jesus said those words?

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<sup>2</sup> Frank T. Griswold, *Going Home: An Invitation to Jubilee*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 2000, p. 26.

*Today* the Scripture has been fulfilled, he said -- not some other day, not some distant day, some vague and far-off moment in the future, but today, this very day.

The Scripture has been *fulfilled* -- what a sweet word that is! To fulfill is to make actual and to bring to completion. What is fulfillment like for you? To me it is like hearing a dissonant chord near the end of a piece of music, and for a few exquisite, painful moments you wait, almost gritting your teeth in your longing for those dissonant notes to resolve -- and then they do -- ah! Fulfillment! Or maybe fulfillment is like waiting at the airport for someone you love to come home, someone who has been away for what seems like forever, and you are pacing back and forth behind the railing, waiting for the doors to open, waiting to see that face again and to hold the person in your arms, and the suspense is nearly killing you, you are almost holding your breath, practically on tiptoe as you elbow the crowd around you, and the doors open at last, and there the person is, walking toward you, looking into your face and smiling -- oh, that is fulfillment, too!

Today this Scripture has been fulfilled, and it is a fulfillment that the listeners have been waiting for ardently not just for a moment, not just for a few days or weeks or even years, but for decades, for lifetimes, for generation upon generation. The people of God have been waiting for the Messiah to come, for the anointed one who will come at last to heal the broken-hearted and set the down-trodden free, to liberate the captives and to give sight to the blind. Our weary, weary world has been longing since forever for fulfillment -- "groaning," as St. Paul says [Romans 8:22-23], as it waits to be set free and to be made whole, suffering like a woman in childbirth as it waits for an end to war and natural disaster, for the coming of peace, the flourishing of justice, the sounds of harmony and laughter.

And today Jesus says: "this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What does this mean? Three things. First, Jesus has discovered his mission. In the course of speaking aloud the passage from Isaiah, he has realized that the words he is uttering have come true. He is the one who has been anointed, baptized by the Spirit, to bring good news to the poor and to proclaim release to the captives. He knows who he is and he has discovered what he has been sent here to do. He has found not only his identity, but also his mission, and everything he does from this point on -- preaching, teaching, healing, suffering, dying -- will be for the sake of following that true north on his compass. His whole ministry will flow from this inaugural sermon and its vision of carrying out God's mission of healing and reconciling and setting free.

"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," and that means, second, as Henri Nouwen points out, that the poor, "the captives, the blind, and the oppressed are not people somewhere outside of the synagogue who, someday, will be liberated; they are the people who are listening. And it is in the listening that

God becomes present and heals.”<sup>3</sup> God is healing us in our listening, setting us free in our listening, right here and right now. This is our day to be released, our day to hear the good news and to be made whole. It is so hard to listen deeply -- we have so much clutter in our minds, so many impulses, memories, and scraps of information. Henri Nouwen invites us to listen deeply in the silence of our hearts as we hear the word of God, and to ask ourselves: How is God coming to me right now, as I listen? “Where do I discern the healing hand of God through the word? How are my sadness, my grief, [my anger] and my mourning being transformed at this very moment? Do I sense the fire of God’s love purifying my heart and giving me new life?”<sup>4</sup>

“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” That means not only that Jesus has found his mission, and that as we listen to his words, we are being healed and made whole. It also means that we have found our mission, too. We have been anointed in our baptism and filled with the same Spirit with which Jesus was anointed and filled. We listen to the same inner voice of love to which Jesus listened. We are sent out, as Jesus was sent out, to embody and make real the healing and liberating presence of God. I encourage us this week to notice the opportunities that God sets before us to carry out this mission right in the midst of our daily lives. These Scriptures are fulfilled in our time when we as the people of God in the name of Jesus Christ put into action the words from Isaiah that Jesus read aloud in the synagogue. We are all members of the one body, and we each have our own part to play. I invite us to pick up our ministries of healing and liberating with fresh energy and resolve, whatever form that ministry may take, and to trust the deep peace that only God can give, the peace that comes from knowing that God is with us, and that the love of God will never let us go.

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<sup>3</sup> Henri Nouwen, *With Burning Hearts*, pp. 45-48, cited in *The Essential Henri Nouwen*, edited by Robert A. Jonas, Boston: Shambhala, 2009, p. 96.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 97.