

Today, This Scripture Is Fulfilled

Luke 4:14-21

Do you have a mission statement? Does Unity Christian Church have a mission statement, and if so do you know it? Mission statements for our lives or ministry tell us and others the focus of that we do and why.

Jesus' reading and interpretation of the words of Isaiah functioned "as a mission statement to the entire ministry of Jesus, setting forth the perspective from which it was to be understood" Luke 4:14-21 offers us a sense of the center of the gospel, an overarching mission statement for his ministry. Luke said that Jesus himself chose to read this part of Isaiah and that he drew selectively on the tradition to emphasize his ministry to the poor. From the beginning of his ministry Jesus' work was to bring good news to the poor; liberation to the impoverished and oppressed. What we understand to be the heart of the gospel will be the central shaping force in our life of faith; the plumb line of Jesus' teaching. In our passage we learn what Jesus came to do; insofar as we measure our lives against this, we are following Jesus' ministry. We should keep *coming back* to this to measure our work.

Jesus' reading from the scroll of Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth was after his baptism and temptations in the wilderness. For Luke, all three events are Holy Spirit stories as the Spirit claimed, tested, and empowered Jesus for the ministry that lay before him. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove while he was praying after his baptism and spoke the claiming word of affirmation. Then the Holy Spirit filled and led Jesus into the wilderness for a time of testing as Jesus refused the pathways that were

the wrong choices for his servant ministry. As Jesus returned to Galilee, the Holy Spirit filled him with power for ministry as he read a text that would be his mission statement as Messiah.

It is easy to get sidetracked from the central message of the gospel. The prophets often had to remind the people about God's main purposes. Thus in Isaiah 1 the Lord asked: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?" (v. 11). The Lord indicated there had been "enough of burnt offerings" and that there was no divine delight in blood sacrifice. "When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand?... Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me" (vv. 12-13). The Lord commands that the people, "Trample my courts no more" (v. 12c), and that they "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (v. 17). Luke, in the traditions of Isaiah as well as the wider prophets, deemphasizes ceremonial displays of righteousness, underscoring acts of human compassion and social justice instead. The primary question is not so much, what does God demand for righteousness? It is, rather, who needs attention and compassion?

It is interesting to put this narrative of Jesus' mission statement alongside John Updike's novel *In the Beauty of the Lilies*. This novel is the tale of a turn-of-the-century minister, Clarence Wilmot, who lost his faith in the God he was taught in seminary. The God Wilmot was taught—rationalistic, all powerful, and in control—made no sense in light of the poverty he was seeing around him. His seminary teachings were like the "twigs of an utterly dead tree," such "sad sap," "paper shields against the molten iron of natural truth"

Wilmot concluded that his genteel professors had sold him on a message that was half wishful thinking, half self-promoting lies. "The doctrine had

for these years past felt to Clarence like an invalid, a tenuous ghost scattered invisibly among the faces that from sickbeds and Sunday pews and oilcloth covered kitchen tables of disrupted, impoverished households beseeched him for hope and courage, for that thing which Calvin in his Gallic lucidity called *la grace*."

At one point in his ministry, Wilmot decided against expanding the church buildings; he could not justify adding underused ecclesiastical structures when poor immigrants down the street slept six to a room. Apparently his education did not provide him the wherewithal to see in that decision any link either to his faith or to his ministerial calling. He considered a turn to the poor to be a turn away from the all-powerful God. The moderator of the presbytery identified his problem as having been shaped by a conservatism that would not adapt to the vicissitudes of life and history. Having studied the two Hodges and Warfield, theologians who could not bend, Wilmot's faith shattered when the storms of life overwhelmed his doctrine.

The moderator was correct, but too late. The litany "*There is no God*" kept repeating in Wilmot's head. He never saw an alternative to the God of the inflexible doctrines he learned. Wilmot ended up peddling encyclopedias to people who could not afford them (but bought them anyway), mirroring the doctrinal peddling he was trained to do as a minister.

Wilmot, steeped in authoritative doctrine about Christ, somehow missed Luke's Jesus. If only Wilmot and his professors had opened Luke and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." **Carol Lakey Hess**

Luke tells us in Acts how the Holy Spirit came upon the believers at Pentecost and launched the church in witness. In our scripture we are told

the Holy Spirit's involvement in the life of Jesus as he stepped forth in public ministry. Even Jesus was not self-sufficient. He is dependent upon his God for life, faith, and mission.

Luke wanted us to know that it is the Holy Spirit who led Jesus in saying “no” to false options in the temptation story and saying yes to a mission that is given to him by God. When Jesus reads Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue in Nazareth, he was declaring that his ministry in the Spirit as Messiah of God called him to be an agent of mercy to the downtrodden in this world: he would be good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and new beginnings for all who have failed.

The Rev. Joan Gray commented, "When you really think about it, this work of the Spirit was the only thing the early church had going for it. It had no buildings, no budget, no paid staff, and very few members." The opposite situation may face us: we have buildings, budgets, staff, and members, but do we have the power of the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit gives us something to do for God. Everyone seems to want to know, "How are we doing as a church?" The real question is, "As a church, what are we doing for God?" Jesus stepped forward in Nazareth and declared the truth about his life: he had been filled with the power of the Spirit and anointed to bring good news to the poor. To know our mission and to understand what God has given us to do are as important to us as they were to Jesus. Tom Harvey, a missionary in Singapore, preached these words: "Mission catches you up in the life and vitality of God, for it is God who relentlessly draws men and women to himself in love and compassion. Moreover, when we step away from mission, there is a corresponding depletion of the life and vitality in the church."

How can we know that we have the power of the Spirit? We know because the Holy Spirit gives us something to do for God, and a time to do it. There is a sense of urgency in Jesus' mission. He finished reading, rolled up the scroll, gave it to the attendant, sat down, and with all eyes upon him said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The time of God's Holy Spirit is today, right now. It is the Holy Spirit speaking when you hear God whisper to you: "Child of God, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day."

Luke wants us to know how Jesus' ministry began upon this earth. It began when the Holy Spirit claimed him in baptism, tested him in the wilderness, and filled him with power for an urgent ministry of grace to the downtrodden in this world. The Holy Spirit came and taught Jesus what was real: to say no to the false options and temptations in this world and yes to God's good purposes for all people; to say no to self-glory in all its forms and yes to helping the poor and the captured of all kinds; to say no to trying to get your God to work for you and yes to working for your God with urgency and compassion.

The Holy Spirit comes when we have something to do for God and a time to do it. Following Jesus means accepting his mission and his time. What would change in our lives and in our churches if we stood and declared to God and to one another, "God gives us no other day than today to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and new beginnings to all who have failed"? Jesus went forth in the power of the Spirit as an agent of God's mercy to the downtrodden, and so do we. **Robert M. Brearley**

Today, this scripture is fulfilled in our lives as we allow the Holy Spirit to empower us to do God's work in the world.

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