

**The Third Sunday after Epiphany, Holy Trinity Church, January 27, 2022**

**Luke 4: 14-41: *Joy is the Surest Sign of the Presence of God.***

**Preached**

**By**

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**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.**

**The story is told of a Franciscan monk in Australia assigned to be the guide and "gofer" to Mother Teresa when she visited New South Wales. Thrilled and excited at the prospect of being so close to this great woman, he dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about. But during her visit, he became frustrated. Although he was constantly near her, the friar never had the opportunity to say one word to Mother Teresa. There were always other people for her to meet. Finally, her tour was over, and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the Franciscan friar spoke to Mother Teresa: If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane so I can talk to you and learn from you? Mother Teresa looked at him. You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea? she asked.**

Yes, he replied eagerly. “Then give that money to the poor,” she said. “You will learn more from that than anything I can tell you.” Mother Teresa understood that Jesus’ ministry was to the poor and she made it hers as well. She knew that the poor more than anyone else needed good news.

On a Saturday morning, in Nazareth, the town gathered in the synagogue to listen to Jesus read and teach. It was no big surprise. He was well known in the area; it was his hometown. He was raised there. They wanted to learn from him. So, when he read from the Isaiah scroll, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor,*” everyone understood these words to be the words of the Prophet Isaiah. It is how the prophet from long ago defined his ministry.

When Jesus finished that reading he handed the scroll to the attendant and sat down. In that day you sat in the Moses Seat to teach to the people. Today, we priests preach standing in the pulpit. So, all eyes were on Jesus, waiting for him to begin his teaching. What would he say about this great Prophet Isaiah? Would he emphasize the bad news? Israel had sinned and would be taken into captivity by the Babylonians. Or would he emphasize the good news? One day God would restore his people and bring them back from captivity in Babylonia. It was Israel’s ancient history, but it still spoke volumes.

**Now here's the wonderful twist, the thing that catches everyone off guard that Saturday morning in Nazareth. Jesus does neither. He doesn't emphasize the past. He focuses on the present. He doesn't lift-up Isaiah as the great role model; Jesus lifts-up himself. This is the pertinent point. It's what upsets everybody at the synagogue. It's why everybody was furious with him and drove him out of town. They were going to kill him. He dared to say that these great words of Isaiah were really, about himself. "Today," Jesus said, "this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."**

**So, this morning let's look at the ministries of Isaiah and Jesus. Why are their ministries so closely tied and why does Jesus describe himself as fulfilling Isaiah's ministry? You know, Jesus had an uncanny ability to take people by surprise and they weren't always pleased about it. Take, for instance, the surprise Jesus sprung on the congregation in Nazareth from our gospel story in Luke. Jesus had just returned to his hometown in Nazareth. It was the Sabbath. So, he went to the synagogue, as any observant Jew would. The synagogues of Jesus' day didn't usually have paid or appointed rabbis. So, Jesus was handed a scroll from the book of Isaiah and asked to read it and preach on it. He knew just the passage he wanted. He went straight to Isaiah chapter 61, a Messianic passage of great importance to the Hebrew people, and read these words:**

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

And then, when Jesus was sure he had everyone's attention, he closed the scroll, he sat down, and announced very simply, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." As Gomer Pyle would say, "Surprise, Surprise, Surprise." "Hello." Say what? Say that again Jesus of Nazareth? The prophet Isaiah had been inspired to write those words more than 700 years earlier. For seven centuries, the rabbis and teachers of the holy word had preached on a soon to come Messiah who would turn the world upside-down. He would lift up the hurting, the oppressed, and the blind. The Hebrew people knew only too well what it was to suffer, to be held captive, to be slaves. They had waited hundreds of years for the fulfillment of this prophecy, and were prepared to wait hundreds more if necessary. And now a poor, no-name carpenter from their own village claims to be that Messiah who would "proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." How would you react if you were in their shoes? Is it any wonder that later on in Luke, we discover that the men of the synagogue tried to kill Jesus? But we can't blame the Nazarene congregation for their reaction. That is the nature of the gospels. The gospels

are neither a discussion nor a debate. The gospels are an announcement of the good news. And that's exactly how Jesus treated it. The announcement is one of great joy. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Your joy is not in the past and not in the future. Your joy is today. Jesus didn't explain, argue or pontificate. He just announced this unbelievable piece of information and let the worshipers make up their own minds. Still today, if we take this passage seriously, it has the same potential to blow our minds too. Jesus' announcement tells us a number of important things about God that calls each of us to joy this evening/morning.

First, our God is a God of hope. Listen to Jesus' message again: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* Wherever Jesus went, he brought hope. It was his calling-card.

He brought hope to the leper, exiled and cast out from his home and his community. He brought hope to the paralyzed man who was unable to care for his family. To people who felt worthless, or felt lost, or felt broken, or felt rejected, or felt beyond saving, Jesus brought the message that God loved them and they had a purpose in life. Even in Jesus' last moments, when he was dying in agony on the cross, he offered the hope of eternal salvation to the

**thief dying beside him. Giving people hope was Jesus' first act in life and his last act before he died on the cross. From the time Jesus was an infant and Mary brought Him to old Simeon at the in the Temple for circumcision to Dismas the thief whom He was crucified with on Mt. Calvary, Jesus brought hope and with that hope there burns joy in the heart of the Christian and joy is the surest sign of the presence of God in your life.**

**In Dante's *Inferno*, the author imagines, that the entrance to Hell is marked by a sign which says, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." Dante can't be far off the mark. Where God is, there is hope and joy. Where God is absent, there is no hope and there is no joy and that hopeless, joyless life is truly hell, a creation of our own making and not God's; that was the message Jesus came to share with us.**

**Jesus tells us God our Father and His Father is a God of justice.**

**Jesus came to turn this world view upside down. No longer does might equal right. He came to declare that God loves the poor, the blind, the sick, and the oppressed even more because of their humble state. Jesus announced that riches on earth are meaningless. It is treasure in Heaven for which we should be striving. He showed that a healthy body is worthless, if one's soul is dead in sin. Jesus declared that a person could have 20/20 vision and still be spiritually blind.**

**Before, I was a priest, I worked in a medical clinical laboratory, I became friendly with an Indian doctor in our building. As a hematologist, we saw lots of his patients. Bishnu was very sociable and I had many opportunities to talk with him. He told me that he was a Dalit. This was the lowest rung of the Indian Caste system. Dalits were targets of persecution and abuse because they were Christians. The doctor told me what attracted him to Christianity was that in Jesus Christ, he met a God who loves and lifted up those whom others would tear down and abuse. Jesus heart is with those who suffer because He is a suffering servant. Jesus cared about those who suffer, who are helpless, who are brokenhearted, and who are in bondage. He said, Jesus will not abandon us to our despair. Our God is a God of hope. Our God is a God of justice. The justice Jesus gave me was the hope against all odds of becoming a physician and treating the sick and then watching God heal has been my greatest joy.**

**Jesus tells us that His Father and our Father is a God of freedom.**

**In Jesus' day, there were slaves who surely thought that they were made to be slaves, that God had ordained them to be inferior and that their oppression was inevitable. But Jesus continually demonstrated that God is a god of freedom, not bondage. When Jesus walked this earth, He rebuked the power structures that oppressed people. And Jesus made it a regular practice to set**

**people free. Jesus freed sick people of their diseases. Jesus freed disabled people from their handicaps. Jesus freed sinners from the burden of their sins. Jesus freed those people possessed from the torments of their demons. Jesus broke the chains of fear, confusion, and anxiety in the lives of the people he touched. Our God is a God of freedom. And Jesus can free you too. Can you imagine the joy of freedom from all that binds you in your life? Can you smell the fresh air of freedom from all the shames that bind you so tightly? Some of us, too, have been living for years in prison cells of our own making. We are bound by addictions, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, fear, guilt, shame, and misconceptions about God. We sit in expressionless silence when we hear talk in a sermon about living a joyful life, or stepping out courageously in faith, or living a full and abundant life. Some of us may feel we are just lucky enough to make it through the day without collapsing from the weight of our chains. But we weren't made to live that way. We were made for the joy of today's gospel message. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."**

**My dear sisters and brothers in Christ, here is the challenge for this week. You can be free. Think deeply about your life, reach out the Holy Spirit of God is always the spirit of freedom; the spirit that is not of God is the spirit of bondage, the spirit of oppression and depression. But, always remember, the**

**God who made the birds free to fly the heavens never made birdcages. Cages are the construct of people. People make birdcages. When we get out into God's great free life, we discover that is the way God truly meant us to live. The joy comes in the faith and freedom of knowing we are truly the children of God.**

**The Spirit of God is always a spirit of freedom. So, what do you think? What is our God all about? Our God is all about hope; our God is all about justice and our God is all about freedom. It was a surprise to Jesus' listeners 2000 years ago, and if we really think about it, it still is a surprise to us today.**

**Jesus came to share the good news that God cares about our hopelessness, our oppression and our bondage and that joy is the surest sign of the presence of God in our lives. Let us rejoice and be glad in the hope, justice and freedom of God knowing that today this scripture has truly been fulfilled in your hearing. Amen.**