

“Fulfilled in Your Hearing”

What would it be like to have a famous professional athlete or a movie star join us at church? It would be a little unusual for sure, probably a bit exciting. We’d wonder what he would do or what he would say. It would have an impact on our whole church-going experience.

In Jesus’ day, there were no televised sporting events. There were no big-screen movies. Fame was a different sort of thing then compared to what it is now. It had to be. But make no mistake about it. At the time of the events of our sermon text this morning, Jesus was a famous man in the region of Galilee. That was the northern region of the Promised Land that included his hometown of Nazareth.

That Sabbath day, the synagogue in Nazareth had a very special guest. In fact it would be impossible for us to conceive of a guest any more special than this one. And Jesus told the people who were listening to him that this was the case.

The first verse of our text sets the scene. It tells us how Jesus had become well-known in the region. He was preaching and teaching in the power of the Spirit, with whom he had been anointed at his baptism in the Jordan River. It’s a reasonable assumption from what we know of Jesus’ earthly ministry from the rest of Scripture that his work may have included performing miracles as well. Those who had seen and heard Jesus told others, who often went to see and hear him themselves and who also told others.

Jesus would regularly visit the Jewish houses of worship, the synagogues in the various towns. These synagogues bore many similarities to our churches today. They were not so much like the Temple in Jerusalem where people went to present their offerings and sacrifices to God through the priests. Rather, they were places for the people to gather together and to hear the Word of God. Selections were read from the Scriptures, and sometimes the leaders would offer a message giving comments about the passages. The synagogues were a natural place for Jesus also to preach and teach.

And so he did. He taught in the synagogues throughout Galilee, where the people recognized his power. They appreciated his grasp on the teachings of God’s Word. They were excited to have such a bold and dynamic preacher among them. They knew he was something special.

And in our text, the people of the Nazareth synagogue learned exactly how special he was.

It seems likely again that Jesus had visited the synagogue in Nazareth before, and likely many times as he grew up there. But by this time he had been away for a while, and he had returned as a famous preacher and teacher. You can imagine, then, how full the church must have been. It was probably like Christmas or Easter here. There was an extra special reason for people not to miss it that day.

And Jesus stood up to read. It was a common enough practice for visiting teachers to read Scripture, or otherwise for the men of the synagogue to take turns doing so. It seems that the men of Nazareth would have been eager for Jesus to serve in this way, and Jesus was willing and eager to do so. The scroll of Isaiah was given to him, and he found chapter 61. He read the first two verses of that chapter, and then he sat down.

We take note that out of respect for the Word of God, it was the custom to read it standing up, but to continue the teaching from a seated position. Certainly that is a different approach to what we are familiar with here, where the pastor stands in the pulpit to more easily see and be seen. As Jesus sat down, no doubt the people throughout the synagogue became even more silent than they had been before and leaned in to make sure that they heard every word that this famous preacher was about to say. And Jesus said, **“Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”**

In other words, “What I have read was written about me. I am doing what the prophet promised long ago. This prophecy has reached its fulfillment, and the fulfillment is taking place right in your midst.”

Let's take a closer look at that prophecy. Isaiah wrote many things about the Servant of the Lord, the Anointed One. As Luke quotes these verses, Jesus read: **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."**

These words describe who Jesus is and what he does. At his baptism, he was anointed by the Holy Spirit. He was set apart for his work, and the Holy Spirit prepared and strengthened him for that work. Luke alluded to that already in the first verse of our text when he wrote, **"Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit."** He was the servant of the Lord, the Messiah.

And he would preach good news to the poor. To the poor who had nothing that they could bring to God or present to him, not in a material sense but in a spiritual one, the Messiah would proclaim true riches. In the same way, he would proclaim freedom for captives, sight for those who were blind, and release for the oppressed. He would proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. This last reference is to the Year of Jubilee, every fifty years, when God had commanded that debts were to be forgiven. The Messiah had come to proclaim that God was forgiving the debts his people owed. The words that Jesus read were words of love and forgiveness, free and faithful grace. In the midst of the people gathered at Nazareth's synagogue sat the Messiah who would carry out and was carrying out what had been promised. As Jesus said, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."**

So where do we find ourselves in this account? Did you hear it? Jesus read about us. He called us the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed. All those describe our natural condition. All those descriptions explain the reasons we look to Jesus and his Word. We are spiritually poor in and of ourselves. We have no good things that we can offer to God to earn his love or his favor. We have no riches to offer him for our salvation. We are blind to all things holy and spiritual until Jesus opens our eyes to them. We are oppressed prisoners, trapped by the powers of sin and Satan, and doomed to death and hell.

But in the midst of us is Jesus. Anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit, he is set apart to do the work of rescue and release and forgiveness. He is chosen not only to proclaim the good news but to be the good news. Through faith in him we have spiritual sight. We have riches beyond imagination. We are set free. Our debts have been paid.

These things are being fulfilled in your hearing today. Yes, Jesus did his work long ago. Yes Jesus died on the cross and rose from the grave many years in the past. But he still promises that where two or three are gathered together in his name, he is with them. He still stands and sits before us to proclaim the good news, only he now does so through the power of his Holy Word. For eyes that would often wander back into darkness, he shines forth his holy light. To those who cannot help but turn back toward the prison of sin, Jesus comes to show the way out. He speaks of your baptism through which he washed away your sin. He speaks to you personally and intimately in Holy Communion, for the forgiveness of your sins.

Week after week we have a special guest in our worship services. Day after day we have his Word where the same guest joins us in our homes. Let us never tire of meeting and listening to him. Let us never tire of hearing about our freedom and the grace given to us. Let us never tire of sharing that good news with others.

May our prayer always be that which we prayed earlier today: "Almighty God, you sent your Son to proclaim your kingdom and to teach with authority. Anoint us with the power of your Spirit that we, too, may bring good news to the afflicted, bind up the brokenhearted, and proclaim liberty to the captive; through Jesus Christ, your Son." Amen.

The Text: Luke 4:14–21 (NIV84)

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, ²¹ and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”