

Fulfilled

Luke 4:14-21

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Epiphany 3 C

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As we pass into another week of the Epiphany season, we see our Lord Jesus revealed to more as he reveals himself to the people of his own day. Shortly after being anointed by the Holy Spirit at his baptism, Jesus returned to Galilee and began to teach the people his message of salvation. Now another week had come to an end, it was Saturday, the Sabbath. And as a law-abiding Jew, Jesus went to the local synagogue. Now, the worship life in Israel was a little different than the structure we are used to, thanks largely to the work Jesus carried out. See, they one had one true house of worship; the temple in Jerusalem. That's where the high priest and all the other priests worked, that's where sacrifices were offered, that's where the Most Holy Place was that God's full presence would dwell in. That was the place where you came to connect with the Lord with the priest as your intermediary.

The local houses of worship, the synagogues, were simply places where Jews could gather in their local communities on the Sabbath and meditate on God's word, study the scriptures together and sing their praises to him. These were not mandated in the law of Moses like the temple, they were simply a Jewish invention of convenience and practicality. Nothing wrong with that, of course. Well anyway, these synagogues were places where the believers gathered, but since the religious leaders only worked out of the temple, these houses of worship didn't have a leader over them like our churches have pastors. Instead, someone from the community who was educated on the Lord, a scribe or teacher of the law, would be invited to come forward at the appropriate time during the worship. This man would read a section of God's word from the scrolls, then would sit down before the people and expound on its meaning to them.

Jesus had gained enough notoriety as a teacher of the law, that apparently he was invited to come forward to speak in the towns he visited. And on this particular Saturday he returns home, to Nazareth, and being handed the scroll of Isaiah, he finds the particular passage he wants to share with the people, a passage that will further reveal himself to them. From Isaiah 61 he reads: **"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."**

That's some pretty good news here. Jesus sits down to expound on this reading to the people. They expect him to reference the interpretations of the rabbis and priests from centuries before, to teach them what they ought to do with their lives and how they can please God through their obedience; as that was the primary focus of the Jewish religious life, the ongoing grind to please God through obedience. But instead Jesus reads this section of unmistakable good news, simply blessing poured out from the Lord without cost, the favor of the Lord given freely. And then Jesus drops the bombshell, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."** (v21). You can probably imagine or perhaps you remember the uproar that follows this statement. In fact we will be looking at that next week. For today, let's focus in on that word, "fulfilled".

It's an innocent enough word, probably one we don't give too much of a second thought when we come across it. But have you considered the complete implications of this term, especially when used by God himself? If you want to try to grasp what the Lord is really saying, perhaps flip the word around. Filled full. You see, in the Lord, everything has a state it is supposed to be, a completeness that it is striving to reach. You could call it perfection, you could call it being finished, you could call it being fulfilled. But whatever term you want to use, the idea is there; this is now exactly what the Lord intended. All that was lacking has been filled in and it is now perfect, complete, and filled to the full measure.

This was Jesus' statement. What God was waiting for, what he intended to the people through these words of Isaiah had now come to completion through Jesus. And the interesting thing is how we can speak of this fulfillment on multiple levels when it comes to our Savior. You see, in a very real way, our Savior came to fulfill us. We can see this in the prophecy from Isaiah. Those he comes to help are poor, prisoners, blind and oppressed. Each one of these conditions could be described as a lack, they are all missing something that we would consider normal or necessary. And to each one of these deficiencies, the one anointed by God (in other words, Jesus) has the solution. He has what will make us whole, complete and fulfilled.

Of course, these physical conditions listed are only symptoms that happen because of the real deficiency we all have. We are poor, because we have nothing good of our own. Nothing we “have” is ours, it is all only given to us if God decides to do so. By nature we are born in sin, another kind of complete lack. We do not have the perfection, the holiness, that God requires. And so what does that mean for us? It means that we can produce nothing good on our own. Every thought is tainted with selfish desire. Every word and action is corrupted by chasing what “I” want instead of looking out for the good of those around me. And it doesn’t matter who gets hurt in the process either, as long as I get what I’m after. Oh there may be some people we wouldn’t hurt...but that’s only because we want them to keep on liking us the way they do.

And if we can produce nothing good, not only is that just a serious character flaw, it also means we can earn nothing of our own. God is in control of the supply here, not us. God is the one who sets the standards and the rules. The only way to deserve anything from him is to be holy, to say and do and think the right things. We don’t. So we are truly poor. Not only in material terms, since nothing we have is our own; but even moreso in spiritual terms. We do not have what God asks of us. It is God who decides our ultimate fate, and he has set the standard for a good end. We must be holy. We must obey his law of love completely. We do not have the obedience he asks for.

We are powerless to change this arrangement. We are truly prisoners to this natural state. We do not have this holiness and we cannot reverse this fact. All we can do is dig ourselves deeper and deeper into the selfish pit of sin. And what’s worse is that we don’t even see it. We are blind. For all we know, everything’s fine. Oh sure, maybe there’s that little itch in the back of your mind that something’s not quite right with our lives, but it’s easy to ignore if you distract yourself enough. Our sin is a cage, our nature holds us captive, but we are so blind by nature we cannot even see it. Without intervention, we are happy to wander blindly through life right into our eternal death.

But in Christ, you are fulfilled. All that you truly lack is replenished and made complete. Howso? Because he fulfilled the plan of salvation by being fully in your place. He lived a holy, human life. He earned eternal life before God. He didn’t need it for himself. In fact, he put aside the riches of his divine glory and power to do this for you. He gave of himself that you might be filled with his fullness. He went to death on your behalf. He gave you the life he earned for you and he took away the punishment for your sins against the Lord. And on the cross he expressed the same thought as before when he declared, “It is finished.” The work was fulfilled, complete, perfected. What God intended it to be, it now was. The curtain that separated God from man in the temple was torn from top to bottom. In Christ, we are filled full of what we lack, and now we can approach God personally without an intermediary.

So you may be poor by nature, but Christ gives you the riches you need. You may have been a prisoner of sin, but he has set you free from its chains. You may have been blind to the Lord, but by his power he has opened your eyes so you can see your God and your Savior. You have been fulfilled. You have been made what God needs you to be that you might be saved. All this, given freely by the one anointed to save you; Jesus.

For now, we strive to be this goal that God has made us. We reach for the perfection that is given to us freely in Christ that we might know it more fully here on earth. But we are also aware that we will never reach the total fulfillment until we are taken from this world to our heavenly home. Then we will shed the old nature and holy in fact as well as declared. As the bard once said, “’Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.” Why would we want to hold on to this life and the corruption it brings out in us? Why would we want to stay here where we are incomplete, in a world that is broken and lacking? Instead, we long to return to the God who made us and be fulfilled completely. We will work for him while it is day, we will grow ourselves in him while he asks us to stay here. But when the call comes to give up this life and join him, how can we hesitate in the slightest, or how can we deny it for someone we love? Whether newborn and baptized infant or after a hundred years of service, it is always a great thing to be fulfilled in our Lord.

If you find your earthly life lacking, consider what it is that will truly make you full. It is only found in the free gift of love from our Savior. Turn to him, let him reveal himself to you more and more. Let the fulfillment of his love fill you from within as you wait the day of the completion, when you will be made exactly what God intends of you, the day when you will be fulfilled. Amen.