

Getting Your Scripture Fulfilled

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

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Text:
Luke 4:14-21

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Hope United Methodist Church
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA
Phone: 610-446-3351
Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org
Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net
Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶ When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸ "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, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." ²⁰ And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."



If your doctor handed you a piece of paper with some illegible scribbles on it and said, "You need to get this filled right away," you'd know what to do, right? You would take the piece of paper to the pharmacy, let the pharmacist decipher the scribbled letters, and he or she would give you back the medication that the doctor ordered for you. Like pressing the "Easy" button. We do it often enough we know how to get it done.

If your magazine subscription was about to expire, you'd probably get a postcard notice in the mail telling you that you need to renew. You have a few options — 1 year for \$19.95, 2 years for \$34.95, 3 years, the best deal for, \$49.95 — so you would put a check mark in the box that suits you, drop the card in the mail box, and it heads back to the publisher. Your subscription is renewed.

You know how to get your *prescription* filled. And you can get your *subscription* renewed. But are you able to get your *scripture* fulfilled?

If someone walked up to you this morning and said, "It's time to fulfill your scripture," would you have any idea what to do?

Jesus went to his home town of Nazareth one Sabbath and entered the synagogue for worship as was his custom as a faithful Jewish man practicing the religious tradition of his family. He was an adult and they were happy to have him visit so they tried to honor him by asking him to read the scripture for the day. Everybody wants to hear Jesus —

"You remember Yeshua. Mary and Joseph's eldest son. Little 'Shua, oh, he's so grown-up now."

"I heard he's a rabbi. Pretty good reputation, lots of followers."

"Really? Let's let him teach today."

They handed him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He unrolled it and read from a few different places in the prophet's writings and combined several verses to come up with this:

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.

He rolled the scroll back up, handed it to the attendant, and said to the congregation: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

One November several years ago I went home to the church where I (and my then-wife, Debbie) had grown up, a Methodist church in the Tacony neighborhood of Northeast Philadelphia. Both sets of our parents had been married there, we were both baptized there as infants, and we had been married there as well. I was invited to preach for their Anniversary Sunday homecoming service and I was welcomed with open arms. Everyone was glad to see me –

“I remember you when you were just a little baby.”

“You probably don’t remember me but I remember you.”

“I grew up with your mother in this church, and now look at you.”

“I taught you in Sunday School.”

“Little Jimmy. Look at you now!”

It was a lot of fun and I would probably do it again, but ...

But as I reflected back on that day later in the week, I began to wonder what had happened. I shared my feelings with some pastor-friends. “I’m not sure if the congregation really heard what I had to say,” I told some of my colleagues, “They were so preoccupied with who I was and the fact that I had grown up there, that I’m not sure my message came across.” I tried the best I knew how — I preached to them as I would preach to any congregation — I proclaimed the Good News that God has shared with me. I tried to share with those who helped to raise me how they and the Gospel has affected my life and how it can affect theirs. But I don’t think they heard me.

Jesus was in that same kind of predicament. Did the congregation of his hometown synagogue hear what he had to say? Did they understand the Good News of his message? Or were they too preoccupied with who he was — a favorite son — to realize

the importance of what he was preaching — the reality of God’s reign?

Notice the end of the story. “All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. Is this not Joseph’s son?” Did they hear the power of what he was saying to them? Did they realize that he was telling them about his reason for being here — that he was the one who the ancestors had told them about, the one who would bring justice to Israel? Or did they just “speak well of him” because he was “Joseph’s son”, one of their own?

Maybe they did hear him and it frightened them. Later in the story they ran him out of town and tried to throw him off a cliff. Maybe they heard him, but they didn’t understand him.

How many times have you heard this piece of scripture in church? Most of you have heard it more than once or twice I suspect. Yet if I go back to the original question, “How do you get your scripture fulfilled?,” you probably wouldn’t know. Even hearing and knowing this scripture which Jesus pieced together for us, we are still hesitant about what it all means for us even today.

You can get your *prescription* filled and you can get your *subscription* renewed. But “how do you get your scripture fulfilled?” Not sure? Here’s the answer — in this tiny scene in Luke’s Gospel — but do we really want to know?

We like to think of Christianity as a tidy, self-contained set of beliefs or rule for life. Sometimes it seems like all one has to do to be “Christian” is to be a nice person, to live a “right” life (whatever that means), to be polite and mind one’s own business.

In reality, though, Christianity suggests the most radical shift in the paradigm of human interaction that has ever existed. Christianity is not, cannot exist with, is antithetical to, clashes with, and is quite the opposite of — the status quo. Christianity — the teachings of this Jesus from, of all places, the backwater town

of Nazareth — is radical with a capital R. It cannot be contained or boxed in like a set of rules that can be easily defined and followed.

Jesus says, “*today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” And when he said today, he didn’t mean just that particular Sabbath in Israel 2,000 years ago. He was speaking about everyday that that scripture is read and heard and everyday in between the readings as well. Jesus was talking about every day of the mission that would come about as a result of the ministry that he began that morning. He was talking about every day of every age and every time.

And that’s perhaps the most difficult part of Jesus’ proclamation. Today means today. Not tomorrow or the day after, but now. David Buttrick, professor of Preaching and Worship at Vanderbilt University in Nashville said this: “As long as we can hear the gospel as a noble idealism, we can postpone the future and live now in a wallow of ‘middle principles.’ But ‘today’ is a terrifying word; it forces tomorrow’s dream on us before we are ready.”

Think of it this way – there is no future, there is only now. When a baby is born, it’s heart and lungs and brain don’t get a few years to get ready. They start *now* — immediately — or the baby never gets to start at all. There is no future, there is now.

The Broadway musical “Rent” sings it this way: “There's only now / There's only here / Give in to love / Or live in fear / No other path / No other way / No day but today...” I don’t hear that as nihilism or self absorption, I hear it as a wake up call that we have to live God’s love today, not wait until tomorrow to begin.

“There is never time in the future in which we will work out our salvation,” wrote James Baldwin, “The challenge is in the moment; the time is always now.” (James Baldwin (1924 - 1987) US novelist, essayist, in *Nobody Knows My Name*, 1961).

Now – today – is a scary concept. “It forces tomorrow’s dream on us before we are ready” – “*Today* this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

How is it fulfilled? It is fulfilled by not only Jesus proclaiming that he has come to preach but it is fulfilled by *our response* to that preaching and ministry and example.

“To bring good news to the poor.” That means the homeless and hungry, those without financial means, those without spiritual means — the poor in spirit as well as the poor in society. It means those close to us and far away from us. Take the good news to them, not just preach it *at them*, but *take it to them* and *share it with them*. And when you find yourself poor in finances or poor in spirit, because we are each there at some point in our lives, accept the Good News that someone brings to you.

“To proclaim release to the captives.” The captives – those in prison no matter what their crime. The proclamation is that God loves each of us, that God is willing to forgive those who are willing to ask, that there are second chances all over the reign of God. It’s not that the iron bars will be immediately open and they can walk free but that the door to God is always open no matter what bars lock you in.

Yet not all captives are behind bars, are they? Some of us are captive behind our own doors, afraid to come out. Some are captive because they can’t come out due to illness or physical condition, some are captive to paranoia, schizophrenia, depression. To all who are captive to something — to fashion or money or fears or doubts — and that means all of us — we must proclaim release.

“Recovery of sight to the blind.” Not just the physically blind, those without eyesight, but anyone without a vision of the revelation of God. Jesus is talking about recovery of sight to those unable to imagine themselves in God’s presence or imagine themselves with God in their life. He’s talking about those

ignorant of the beauty around them, those unwilling to participate in the fellowship of the Christ. To all who have lost their vision we must heal and comfort, love and confront, teach and uplift.

“To let the oppressed go free.” The oppressed are all who are shackled by the burdens of their life, those who feel the weight of guilt from years and events that have gone by, those who hate because they know no other way, those who hate themselves because they have nothing to love. The oppressed are those who don’t care, who can’t care, who don’t want to even try to care. These are who we must set free. And more often than not *we* are one of *them*. Maybe Pogo got it right: “We have met the enemy and the enemy is us.”

And when do we have to do all this? It’s pretty clear. Now. Today. Right away. Jesus, in Nazareth’s synagogue, pushes us to understand the immediacy of God’s reign. Jesus’ message about the immediacy of it all makes it true, as Buttrick says it, that “*today* is a terrifying word; it forces tomorrow’s dream on us before we are ready.” We’re not ready but the time is upon us. “The scripture is fulfilled in our hearing” – in our presence.

We can fight it. We can resist it. We can explain it away because our schedules are full or our lives are too hectic. We can gripe about it. We can whine and complain and we can even choose not to participate in God’s reign. We have free will — we can reject God if we choose.

But there are rules to being Christian — not a box of beliefs without any bending — but there are some rules. And the primary rule of Christianity is that we are not the Church only when it’s convenient to be the Church or when it suits our needs — like Sunday mornings. If we are a part of the body of Christ, then we are a part of that body now. And we are to proclaim the good news, set the captives free, release the prisoners, offer recovery of sight to the vision-less. And we are to do these things now — today — always.

That’s how to get your scripture fulfilled. It’s hard work, yes, but it’s also easy work – easy yet demanding.

To fulfill your scripture, you must give all that you are and all that you have — now, today, tomorrow, always — so that you can bring the good news, proclaim release, offer recovery, free the oppressed.

Get your scripture fulfilled. Today.

Amen.