

“Fulfilled” (Luke 4:14-21)

There is something within us that delights, causing joy to leap within us and land in the form of a smile on our face, when we receive a gift, especially when it is wrapped. There is a sense of mystery about what exactly is hidden beneath the paper. There is anticipation and excitement as we hear the ripping sound, feel the paper give way starting to reveal clues as to the contents. And then there is that indescribable moment when we realize what the gift is and we can feel a genuine closeness to the person who gave it to us.

Take for example this gift, one that I am giving to myself. When we take a gift into our hands, we size up the gift and consider the possibilities of what it is. We might shake it to see if there is rattling sound and hopefully we don't hear a crashing sound. We will look at the wrapping itself to see if any clues are revealed. Given the nice silver bow on this package it suggests that what is contained within is really valuable, something to be treasured and held close. Contrasting the bow with the brown paper might suggest something that is also ordinary or maybe reminding us of a piece of paper we discover in our grandparent's attic, yellowing and brown on the edges. And so the color brown might signify something wonderful gift that stood the test of time and still relevant in a world where cutting edge electronic gadgets cause either eyes to roll or mouths to drool. So slowly sliding my finger beneath the tape, casting away the paper, we discover someone has a sense of humor, another layer of wrapping paper. Honestly, is there any better paper than the comic section when you want to express a whimsical, yet economic and ecologically responsible sentiment. You see this gift brings joy it brings a wonderful smile to our face when we encounter the irony and playfulness found from this gift. But, enough of waxing eloquently about the virtues of the Sunday comics; what we have are images of a something priceless yet simple, something that is a treasured joy and has stood the test of time, what could it be, what could it be? The gift we receive this morning and every Sunday morning truly is scripture¹, and you all thought it was going to chocolate didn't you? Well, you were partly right.

The gift of scripture, reading scripture, discussing scripture, debating and disagreeing about the meaning of scripture is a gift that we receive from our Jewish ancestors. Jesus grew up in synagogues where the Torah or the Hebrew scriptures were woven into daily lives. From a young age, Jesus would have learned to read from the older testament. Sabbath services began in the home at sun down on Friday night with family worship around the dinner table and reciting memorized parts of the Torah. Saturday services at the temple continued this tradition and **any** adult male could request to read scripture -- even without signing up on a clip board. Learning the scriptures, talking about the themes and trying to sort out what the words might mean was the form of education Jesus most likely received. And so, when Jesus returned to his hometown, to the synagogue where he studied as a boy, the place he grew up, and asks to read, it was a feel good moment for all those involved. This church has recent experiences of nurturing sons and daughters through the waters of finding their faithful voice to proclaim and discovering their gifts to share.

And the passage that is read is one that holds such a rich and hope-filled image. We long for a world where the poor would be surrounded with an intentional care and loving embrace. We thirst for a world where those who are oppressed by addictions or debt or broken relationships that have caused harm would find freedom and new life. We can envision a world

¹ This idea was inspired by Mary Gafner, pastor of Washington Reformation Church in Wisconsin

where those who are ill or hurting would find healing. Isaiah's vision that Jesus read to the people in the synagogue is of God's world where no one would be held captive to another, no one forced to labor for the profit of another. Isaiah's vision is one of egalitarianism and interconnected community; and for many of us such a vision while beautiful feels distant and removed from the real world.

And so what do we do with a vision that seems on the one hand unobtainable and on the other hand so compelling and capturing so concisely what we are called to be about as Christians today? What do we do when it feels like our human efforts to reach out with love to others fall short or flat or fail to make a dent in huge problems like poverty and oppression and people who are created in the image of God being pushed to the fringe of society where they too easily are forgotten or ignored? What do we do in the face of injustice? Often times today, we spend a lot of time talking intellectually about problems that plague our society. We try to rationally solve issues like poverty or oppression or brokenness. Sometimes we might even try not to think about it at all, for indeed it can leave us feeling frustrated and flustered.

Yet, sometimes the Spirit stirs and we respond. Our hearts break for the people of Haiti and so we offer money that can be used for food and water and helping to rebuild. Our hearts break when we hear the statistics on poverty in our own community so we fill a grocery bag or buy a ten pack of Valentines from ECHO. Our hearts break when we try to fathom why so many people are incarcerated in this country so we might visit someone in prison. We know that there are people who need help elsewhere too, so we drop a few pennies in our pew sections jar and several quarters in the left section's jar to help our youth in what we hope will be another great week spent trying to live out these words Jesus read from Isaiah. We keep faithfully trying, we keep praying, we keep striving with authentic actions and loving presence. I think what weighs on us from Isaiah's vision for our world, what grates at us is how easy it can be to slip into cynicism. The moments of compassion fatigue and wondering how long, O God, before our human efforts stop feeling like we are trying to drain Lake Superior with a leaky children's bucket?

What might leave us disjointed is not only Jesus' reading, but Jesus' opening sentence of his sermon. Now whatever it is that we expect out of sermons, the truth is they are built upon the fragileness of words. Whatever we expect from these words we hear and whichever of these words you will still remember by Wednesday, the reality is we don't usually make major changes because of something the preacher said. And yet, Jesus boldly claims that Isaiah's words about good news to the poor and healing and release are actually fulfilled in the hearing, in our hearing today. Part of what is disconcerting and jarring to us about suggesting Isaiah's vision is fulfilled is we have countless examples springing to our mind where those words about wholeness and healing **are not true**. We need only open the paper, flip on the news, or talk to our neighbors to compile enough evidence that we don't live in a world where the poor are always taken care of or everyone is equally loved. But friends, it could also be that we are clinging to the wrong definition of the word, "fulfilled". When I opened my synonym finder this week to this word 'fulfill' some of the first images were about accomplishing or completing, but then I kept reading and found words like 'abide by' and 'cling to' and 'live up to' and 'keep faith with'. I don't know the exact sense of the word, "fulfilled" Jesus was trying to use, friends I don't even know the Aramaic word Jesus would have used; but I do know that if in my hearing of Isaiah's vision today I am going to cling to that worldview, if I am to live up to and keep faith with that vision then perhaps that is a better understanding of fulfillment. Moreover if Jesus was saying that by hearing these words we are to abide with those who are poor and disheartened then I can neither hastily dismiss nor get invitation out of my heart. If fulfillment is about keeping

faith with those who are pushed to the edges, if fulfillment is about clinging to those who others discount, if fulfillment is about keeping faith with those who are suffering then friends I need to hear that and I need to hear that today and for a thousand days to come.

You see, it's easy to get wrapped up in my little part of this universe. But if I un-wrap fulfillment for the gift that it is and for the challenge it brings to the living out of my faith, then that can break through and change my life. It means I keep praying and looking for places I might offer help and love to the people of Haiti. It means I look at the people wandering down the street by the church so that I see a child of God. It means we keep constantly open to ways we as a church can abide with, stay faithful to our neighborhood, we keep challenging each other in a good way to live out our identity grounded in mission, reaching out with unconditional love to those who are lost and lonely and hurting in this world. So may this hopeful passage be fulfilled in our hearing. May this hopeful passage disrupt us and gnaw at us this week. May this hopeful passage about God's vision for our world help us keep us accountable and compel us to keep risking a mission alongside, abiding with and keeping faith beside those in this community and in this world.

Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen!"