



# Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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## “Fulfillment Today”

Luke 4:14-21

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You have no idea how tempting it is after reading this text, to climb up into the pulpit and simply declare, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing,” and then go and sit back down. Brevity has its place. I taught preaching at United Theological Seminary in the Twin Cities, and I don’t know what I would have done had a student of mine pulled a stunt like that.

This was something of a homecoming sermon for Jesus, delivering it in the synagogue of his hometown. And that can be a rather daunting task. Anytime you return home or get invited back, to preach before people who knew you when—who perhaps watched you grow up, they will see and hear you differently, that’s for sure.

And back in Jesus’ day, not unlike our own, scripture was read in the temple or synagogue, and then a rabbi or some other cleric would deliver a sermon or teach a lesson, based on that text. They would seek to better understand the critical issues or the politics of the day in light of the words from that ancient text. They’d bring the ancient text to life, making it relevant to the day. So Jesus was handed a scroll by an attendant, and it was from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus unrolled the scroll and searched the text until he found the exact portion of it from which he wanted to read.

Perhaps some of you remember from my time as your pastor, when in sermons, I’d talk about the church of my childhood, back in Grand Rapids, Michigan. And about how I would portray it in a not-so-favorable-light. I’d share with you how rigid it was theologically. How judgmental and severe it seemed then, and even more so today looking back on it. The way they so firmly opposed the ordination of women, and how they didn’t want women in any leadership roles in the church. I shared with you how they made grace seem stingy and hard to come by.

Thank you, by the way, for letting me work out my own personal issues publicly, in front of you and from this pulpit! Well some time ago, I was invited to preach at the church of my childhood, and not everyone in the congregation was wild about the idea. Because rumors had filtered back to them that I had strayed quite a ways away from my orthodox upbringing. So some were nervous about having me back. But they liked my parents, and so I was invited back. They told me to read from the King James Version of the Bible. They told me to leave my robe at home. But they didn’t tell me what to preach about.

Before the service, I met with about four elders, all stern and serious looking men, and one of them prayed. In King James language he prayed, “And O Lord we pray that thou wouldest be with this thy servant David, as he prepares to mount thy sacred desk.” “Mount thy sacred desk?” I puzzled. “I thought you invited me to preach? I didn’t know I’d have to do my own stunt work!”

So on that Sunday I preached to the hometown folks, and I preached on the gifts of women. I preached about the significant roles that women had played in scripture and in Jesus’ own life and ministry. And I went so far as to say that it was perhaps the women around Jesus, the ones who raised him and supported his ministry, who were most responsible for his theological development. Well, the church of my childhood endured my sermon that day. They didn’t run me out of town or off a cliff, but they never invited me back again, either!

Returning home is sometimes difficult and that’s what Jesus faced that day. An attendant in the synagogue handed him a scroll from the prophet Isaiah, and Jesus unrolled it and searched it intently, until he found the exact place from which he wanted to read, and he began,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he had 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.

Then, in rather dramatic fashion, he rolled the scroll back up, handed it to the attendant and sat down. Everyone wondered what he was going to say about it. How will he make sense of that text in light of the current circumstances in our world, they wondered. And with all eyes upon him, Jesus looked out at the hometown crowd and said, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Today. Today? This day? It is fulfilled in these days? How can that be? In a world filled with people who are apparently blind, so blind in fact, they cannot see the truth when it's staring them in the face, how can you say that scripture is fulfilled? In a world full of captives, including young children torn from their parent's arms and put in cages? How can you say that in a world like that, scripture is fulfilled? It makes no sense.

Diana Butler Bass who studies and writes about cultural and societal trends impacting religion and faith communities, trends that take off sometimes faster than we can understand them, has written this.

Faith communities are often consumed with memories of the past and hopes for the future. Speaking of the past may take the form of maintaining buildings and structures, of teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from ancestors. Speaking of the future is often wrapped up in hopes for salvation and eternal life, desires for answered prayers, for the children to hold onto faith or "come back to church." Both past and future are important to vibrant communities; healthy and life-giving practices of honoring our ancestors and embracing a hopeful future is derived from the whole biblical tradition.

She goes on to say, however,

But both "past" and "future" as the primary location of faith have their shadow sides. Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia—the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future—a disposition that is steeped in grief and fear. Overemphasizing the future—the belief that all that matters is that which is to come, often results in thwarted hope, doubt and anxiety.

And she's right about that, isn't she? And while she is writing about faith communities, I think it also applies perfectly to today's society and culture in general. Ours is a messed up world, which is about as sanitized a way of saying it in church. The world is messed up. You know what I'm talking about. So much seems to be going wrong. And so many people have been convinced that things are spiraling out of control and that "others" are to blame. So they find themselves living with deep anxiety, with a profound sense of hopelessness, and, sadly, an incredible amount of fear.

And what's sad about that is that it renders today, the current day and age in which we live, as nothing more than a strange, unpleasant place in which we bide our time, mourning a past we can never retrieve and longing for a future we can't even imagine, let alone hope for.

And I don't know about you, but I don't want to live there. I don't want to find myself stuck in that place. So when Jesus said, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," he wasn't just setting the tone for his entire ministry, he was making a theological statement about the days in which we live. He was addressing the living of these days.

Jesus is inviting his hearers and followers, imploring us actually, to embrace the day. To not live in the past or be unduly fixated on the future, but to dive into the things that need addressing at this very moment. He wants us to open our eyes to the world around us today.

Yes, the world is messed up. There is much that is wrong and deplorable about what is happening today. Yet this remains a world where, thanks be to God, there is an incredible amount of good unfolding and waiting to be discovered and celebrated. So many miraculous things—acts of beauty and kindness and selfless compassion the likes of which will take your breath away, if you take time to notice them and celebrate them.

Because somewhere today, in a broken and fearful world, poor people will hear good news. It may be in the form of discovering for the first time just how much God loves them, but it may also be in the form of a phone call with a voice on the other end of the line saying, “We’d like to offer you the job. When can you start?”

And somewhere today, some poor captive will receive the word of release, complete with a date and time. Today, that is happening.

And somewhere today, someone who was told they’d never see is seeing, and someone who was told they’d never walk is running, and someone who has been living under a tremendous load of oppression is breathing the sweet, fresh air of freedom. Today, those things are happening even in this messed up world.

Listen: The promises of God are true and remain intact no matter how messed up this world is or how discouraging things seem to be.

Our job is to live this day, and all our days, into those promises, and in the awareness of God’s goodness unfolding all around us all the time. We need to seek the good. Then hold fast to the good! And to do that today. Not yesterday or tomorrow, but today.

Because if what Jesus said in the synagogue that day is true, then everything we could possibly need or hope for, we already have. And we have it today. Thanks be to God!

Amen.