THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*“A Word for Today”* Luke 4:14-21

Most of us know what it is like to come home after a long journey. Going off to college is a good example. After being away, after meeting so many new people and doing new things, seeing new sights, and thinking so many new ideas, coming home again can bring happy relief. Or, it can be unsettling because the world you have known for so much of your life seems different.

Either way, you know you have been changed, and the question becomes: will the things we learn about ourselves and the world around us, will they become a part of who we are, or are they just a passing fad, a “phase” that we go through the same way we did adolescent blemishes and all of the fashions and trends of younger years?

In the passage we just heard, Jesus has come home to Nazareth after having been away for a while. In the intervening time, he has begun to move forward into his role and mission. He has been to the Jordan where he was baptized by John and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. He has spent forty days in the wilderness contending with Satan and communing with God and God’s angels, and receiving the strength and power to engage God’s beloved with a ministry of healing, teaching, and nurturing.

He knows what is ahead for him. He knows that his ministry will also reclaim lives of the demon possessed. He knows he will be moved to openly challenge corruption and call leaders to account, he will also speak plainly to individuals about their lives. On both a public and private scale, among persons and institutions he will confront the sins of the world.

And it all starts here in Nazareth, in his own backyard…

In the passage we just heard, apparently, Jesus has returned home in time for Sabbath, and so he is in synagogue. Scholars tell us that after the prescribed Torah lessons have been read, it was customary for individuals who wanted to read the next portion of the service to stand-up. It was also common courtesy to allow visiting rabbis to do this—to read and offer a reflection on the passage.

However, Jesus was not just a visiting rabbi, he was one of their own. He had grown up around all of them and was known—not as a rabbi, but by his family affiliation. To the people in synagogue that day, he was Joseph’s son.

Still, they had been hearing stories about him and how he had already been preaching in other places, and how well he had been received. Luke says: Jesus “*was praised by everyone.”* [v.15b] The gospel suggests that the people in Nazareth had heard about his success and were now eager to hear him speak to them.

We do not know if Jesus chose the Scripture he read or if it was the proscribed passage for the week. We do know that what he read was from two different places in Isaiah. Jesus reads only selected portions of Isaiah chapters 58 and 61.

Says one scholar: Jesus’ reading is *“less a quote than a paraphrase of Isaiah 61:1-2 with the insertion of an imported phrase from Isaiah 58:6 added*—the part that says: *“to let the oppressed go free.”* So, Jesus actually omits a part of the passage in one chapter and joins it to another phrase in another chapter. He omits the phrase in chapter 61 that declares a day of vengeance for the Lord. What we see is that Jesus has chosen to emphasize God’s grace and God’s desire to rescue and comfort the people. By combining Scripture in this way, Jesus is also demonstrating his authority to speak and to minister.

Having read the passage, he sits down and this indicates that he ready to begin a reflection on what he has just read. Luke tells us that *“The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed upon him.”* [v.20b]

I do not know if they were impressed or curious and perhaps a little confused by this “hometown boy” speaking to them with such calm power and authority. No doubt he had the presence of a real leader, a *gravitas*—someone to take seriously and listen to.

And so, they listen as Jesus, very simply, declares: *“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* [v. 21b]

All of those good words of comfort and caring—today is the day they are proclaimed important and real. Jesus’ declaration specifies that this is not about the ancient past, nor about the distant future. The time for the end of suffering is now, today.

Thus, it is clear that from the beginning, and throughout his ministry, Jesus will be guided—as though by some spiritual homing beacon—to those who are in greatest need of his healing touch and loving words. Whether it is a man possessed by a violent demon, or a woman caught in adultery, whether it is ten men suffering from leprosy, or a woman with a bleeding disorder that has plagued and impoverished her for many, many years, Jesus demonstrates an unerring awareness of where the hurting people are and what they most desperately need, and he goes out to them and ministers to them, and ends their suffering—right then and there.

In the “today” Jesus speaks of, suffering is no longer a fate to be silently, or even patiently endured. From now on, “*the year of the Lord’s favor”* is not going to be some far-off time in the future. From now on, the end of oppression, violence, injustice, or any other cruelty or hardship—those suffering any or all of these things are not going to have to wait until they enter *“the sweet by and by.”* The time for suffering to end is now, today, and it is coming to an end in the person of Jesus, himself.

Through Jesus’ life, but especially through his persecution, death, and resurrection, God is demonstrating how deeply and decidedly God is rejecting everything that causes suffering among God’s beloved people. Indeed, through Jesus’ resurrection, God definitively showed us how strong love is, how love—God’s love for God’s son, and by association, all of God’s beloved sons and daughters—God’s love will never be defeated but will rise again and come back into the lives of the beloved.

However, in order for that to happen, we need to be like the people in the synagogue that day: we need to fix our eyes on him—and having seen him, we are called to be dedicated to the same purpose he is: making real that grace and caring should be present and touching lives in need *now*, in this very moment.

What is more, we need to be as calm and focused, but also as *adamant* about it as he was. What I mean is that Jesus’ words are not just good words, his story and the reason we remember it and teach as many as we can about it has nothing to do with it being simply a good story. It is because Jesus *acted* on the words he spoke. He went in search of those in suffering and in need, and he ministered to them then and there.

We read and hear his story so that we may learn to act as he did; so that we, too, may seek out and go to those people suffering and in need. We read and hear his story so that we, too, may act. Indeed, we may even act on Jesus’ claim that God’s love and grace is for the here and now even in the presence of our own suffering.

A little later on in this service, we will take a few moments to observe Kalaupapa Remembrance Sunday because it was in January of 1866 that the first people with Hansen’s disease arrived in Kalaupapa. We will hear an intercessory prayer prayed for us in the original Hawaiian language.

That prayer is actually a hymn that called *Himeni O Kalaupapa* and it has been published in the *Na Himeni Haipule Hawaii* which was published in 1972, I believe, and the 1999 revision, *Na Himeni O Ka ‘Ekalesia.*

The hymn, *Himeni O Kalaupapa,* was written by Samuel Kauwalu, who was twenty-one when he was sent to live in Kalaupapa. He had been a member of Kaumakapili church here on Oahu.

In Kalaupapa, away from his family and friends at such a young age, you might think that Samuel would have given up on life. Nothing could be further from the truth. Samuel, like so many others who were forcibly quarantined in Kalaupapa, continued to *live* his lives. Like him, they built churches—two congregational churches that still stand and minister to the community. Samuel joined the church in Kalaupapa. He also wrote music and volunteered in the Kalaupapa community.

Yes, Samuel and the others’ bodies were compromised by the Hansen’s Disease.

Yes, forced quarantine treated Samuel and all the others like outcasts.

Here is the good news: Samuel and the many others who were sent to Kalaupapa knew that their physical suffering did *not* have to ordain spiritual suffering. They rose above it and built a community of strong, faith-filled people. They cared for themselves and one another. And what is more: they were *not* forgotten.

Even separated from their families, they were remembered. They are remembered even to this day.

Neither did Queen Lili’uokalani forget them. She remembered them and visited them in Kalaupapa in 1877 with gifts of cloth, food, pictures and feathers.

What is obvious to me is that Samuel, Queen Lili’uokalani, and many others knew and also remembered the words of Christ who promised that grace and goodness was theirs, and that no one could ever take that away.

Dignity, strength, courage, and productiveness was still theirs because it was given by a God who saw their suffering, and never left their side—a God who did not let their spirit die but gave them strength every day of their lives.

This is our good news, too. The grace and mercy that we need now in their life, in our context is still offered to us that we, too, may live and thrive and make our lives prayers—and hymns!—of gratitude and love.

Our good news is that we, too, are called to carry the same declaration out to those who suffer, to find them the way Jesus did, and to offer them—out of the abundance of love and grace we are given—the same goodness we have embraced, the same Spirit that lifts up our lives and can make us whole. This is our word for today. Thanks be to God.

Amen.