

Today! – Luke4:14-30 (20Jan19)

I want to start by saying that what Jesus does in this reading embodies my essential understanding of what a sermon is, or what a sermon does. In short, it does what it says. The words of a sermon accomplish the thing they are intending.

My sense of that is built on the Lutheran belief in the power of God's Word as spoken in the words of a sermon (and spoken with the waters of baptism and in, with, and under bread and wine). That Lutheran trust in listening here to hear the voice of God comes from a larger biblical theology around God's Word, that when God says "Let there be light," then there's light.

This also fits into broader modern understandings of how language functions, and fits into the type called "performative language." Rather than second-order descriptions that talk about it (unfortunately, like I'm doing right now in trying to explain), performative language does the thing. When you say, "I forgive you," that is itself the act of forgiveness. It doesn't need to involve giving a rose or genuflecting or anything like that. When you say, "I take you to be my husband," your words accomplish a rather large life-altering change in legal status, and may go with the smaller life-altering change "I promise to do the dishes." Or a worse form of life-altering judgment is the forceful declaration, "You are under arrest" or "I sentence you to ten years in prison."

So we've got examples of how this works, this function of language. To return more to the point, when God says something, things happen. I'll give you two great verses from the prophet Isaiah that fit with this and with what Jesus is doing in Luke. "As the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be [says the Lord] that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Is.55:10-11).

Today Jesus declares, "Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

As you receive the words, he was saying to his audience in the synagogue, you are receiving the good news. It is a life-altering declaration offering God's favor, changing the status of the listeners, accomplishing its purposes, succeeding in the very thing it says it will do.

And though you may be more confident in Jesus than you are in me, this understanding invites you not just to hear my voice and to doubt its effectiveness, but even now to hear the Word of God, continuing to declare this good will to you: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because she has anointed me to bring good news, to proclaim release and recovery and freedom, the liberating Jubilee of God's favor." That message did not remain in a small ancient synagogue. The word of Jesus, the true voice of God, the anointing presence of the Holy Spirit repeats, "Today, this is fulfilled in your hearing."

I want you to hear that message for you. I want you to be able to trust and rely on God's effective proclamation speaking to you, to recognize not only its potential to be life-altering but its potency, that that power is happening to you here and now, in your hearing.

I also want you to know this reiterated blessing from God. In the Gospel of Luke, the very first word Jesus speaks in public is "today!" This is always when God is working. One commentator reminds us of this immediacy and constant presence, saying that "'today never is allowed to become 'yesterday' or to slip again into a vague 'someday'...The time of God is today...The age of God's reign is here...the time when God's promises are fulfilled and God's purpose comes to fruition.'"^{*}

We don't gather in church waiting only for after death, or to be fulfilled in generations to come, through gradual improvements of society. We don't gather simply reflecting back on history and wondering how it would be to listen to Jesus. We gather here and now because it is here and now that God's Word is active and bearing fruit.

^{*} Craddock, *Luke*, p62

It is in this place that new life begins, that you are brought again into the family, that evil is stopped, that you are assured of love and wholeness. This is God's work, and it is fulfilled in your hearing!

As good as that sounds, I can see some agitation out there, ready to protest and say, "Yeah, well, but..." You'll point out that for all of its alleged successful performance, something seemed to fall short that day in Nazareth. You may wonder if what God's Word in the sermon of Jesus accomplished was not so much good news, but the bad news of them trying to kill him, driving him out of the town, trying to chuck him off a cliff.

This still shows his word is effective, just as it encounters the combative effect of sin, as its goodness is resisted, as it still struggles to prove the reality and embodiment of God's will in our world and through our lives.

See, Jesus points out that this word that is fulfilled in their hearing is not a small, personal, restrictive word. It's not a word that follows their preferences of insiders. It's not a word that knows the boundaries of walls and borders. It's not a word that merely comes as a supplement for our lives to verify what we thought we already knew about ourselves.

We'd just as soon have God's message be a congratulations, saying Keep up the good work. But this one who comes casting the mighty down from their thrones and raising up the lowly, this one who comes so that all flesh may know salvation isn't by any means going to say your efforts have earned you a well-deserved place, that your health is because you've done the right exercises, that your paycheck is because you've studied hard and found your way into a good career, that your ease is legitimated by your skin color or your abilities or having the right political views of justice. We want credit for our good behavior or responsibility for our improvement. But God's Word is not about convincing you to change, to shape up. God's Word is about creating the reality of setting right relationships.

As we sang in "Joy to the World," "he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is

found!" That means across humankind and throughout creation. He reaches to Syrians and Saudis and Guatemalans and Filipinos and Russians and Chinese. He reaches to Americans of all stripes, in each of our illnesses and diseases, or self-contented blindness and our poverty, whether of wallet or of spirit. He is anointed to share that Spirit and offer good news. Today this is fulfilled in your hearing.

So God's Spirit is tasked with softening hard hearts and turning unwilling minds, to rejuvenate the faint and distressed, to renew all life worn down. That includes you, and it includes all. So I'll add to Jesus' word and remind you to buck up, not be so self-centered, to realize the inclusion of others doesn't exclude you. This is no zero sum equation. After all, this is a God of eternal life, unending love, infinite kindness.

This is Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday weekend. And since this is one of the occasions during the year where I dwell in his words and expect them to be effective and still becoming part of our reality, I wanted to offer the last words spoken for this Today to be from him. I find difficulty, though; for all of his eloquence, Rev. King falls more on the imperative than on the declarative. He says "must" instead of "is." His words are most frequently aimed at what we *should* do, while God's Word is most ultimately in what God has done, will do, and is fulfilling today. Dr. King says "if, then" where God declares Today!

But maybe these words, from the Selma march, bridge the gap (so to speak) of those who wanted to respond to the words of Jesus by driving him over the edge and to us who want to be swept up in the spread of his blessing, to join the God who is marching on. So let's not hear it as words of there and then, but words of here and now, especially since Rev. King begins with the apt "Today":

"Today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world: We are not about to turn around. We are on the move now. Yes, we are on the move and no wave of racism can stop us.

“We are on the move now. The burning of our churches will not deter us. We are on the move now. The bombing of our homes will not dissuade us. We are on the move now. The beating and killing of our clergy[people] and young people will not divert us. We are on the move now...”

“Like an idea whose time has come, not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us. We are moving to the land of freedom.

“Let us therefore continue our triumph and march to the realization of the American dream...”

“I know that you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ I come to say to you however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long.

“How long? Not long. Because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.

“How long? Not long, ‘cause mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord...Our God is marching on.”**

** *A Testament of Hope*, p229-30