

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
24 January 2010**

*3 Epiphany: Ps 19; Neh 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10;
1 Cor 12:12-31a; Lk 4:14-21*

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“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*”

Today’s passage from Luke tells the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. He begins to teach in the synagogues of Galilee and starts to create a name for himself. But he has yet to teach in his home town of Nazareth, and that’s where we find him in today’s reading. He leads the liturgy of the word by reading from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet, a selection from Isaiah’s sixty-first chapter:

“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,
and to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And then there’s a pause. What’s he going to do with this passage? What insight, what fresh interpretation, what comfort from their beloved prophet Isaiah will this new teacher give them, this person who has been getting good reviews all over the rest of Galilee? He says to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Wow! The promises of Isaiah the prophet that have been ringing in their ears for over six centuries have just become reality in this room, in this synagogue, in this time and place? Amazing! But how, exactly?

Well, you’ll find out more about that next week, when the story continues. But today I want us to listen very very carefully to the exact words of the promise that Jesus says he has come to fulfill. In the equivalent scenes in Mark and Matthew, they do not say what scripture Jesus uses as the basis for his teaching, but Luke selects, out of all the writings of the Old Testament that he had to choose from, this passage from Isaiah that talks about bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, giving the blind their sight, and letting the oppressed go free.

When people ask me why I think social justice is a fundamental theme of God’s good news, a fundamental theme of the gospel of Christ, it is this passage, among others, that I point to. These are the first words out of Jesus’ mouth in Luke’s gospel that describe what his teaching ministry will be about. He doesn’t talk about who’s included in God’s embrace and who’s excluded; he doesn’t talk about men who love other men and women who love other women.

Jesus, the teacher with the growing reputation, has his choice of anything that the Hebrew scriptures had to say about any topic, and he chooses to talk about the poor, the imprisoned, the blind, and the oppressed. Did he forget about those other issues? Did he mean to put them aside and address them at another time? Or are they just not as important for him as poverty, oppression, and blindness?

I leave it to you all to ponder for yourselves, to come to your own interpretations of what is important in Scripture and what is not. Because we are reminded by the Old Testament reading and by the gospel passage that no one reads Scripture without making interpretive choices. Nehemiah tells us how Ezra, his colleague, brought the Scriptures before the people. “So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.” In other words, for the people to understand, it needed not only Ezra’s reading, but Ezra’s interpretation. The notion that there is a single, plain sense of Scripture available to all from a surface reading, a single, plain sense that is true and meaningful for all time, is a notion on which the Bible itself casts doubt. The people of God of every age must read the Scriptures faithfully and persistently, but there is no way we can escape the necessity to make interpretive choices so that we can make sense of God’s word, each in our own day.

Jesus himself is making an interpretation of the prophet Isaiah—in fact a wildly radical interpretation, if you go back and study what Isaiah was originally trying to say. He explicitly connected language that the people had listened to for hundreds of years to the reality they were living in the present: “*Today* this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” And, as you will find out next week, Jesus’ interpretation did not sit well with all his listeners, once he goes on to tell him exactly what he means.

And so, if Scripture is always subject to interpretation, does that mean everyone’s interpretation is correct? Does that mean we can all have our individual interpretations and we never have to accept or make reference to other people’s interpretations, other people’s views? If all Scripture is open to interpretation, am I saying that anything goes? Not really.

It would be nice if I could tell you that I know the one right method of interpreting Scripture, the one fool-proof procedure that will always result in the one single right understanding. Instead I’ve learned that there have been multiple methods of interpretation from the beginning of our history, and that faithful followers of the Christian way have always had questions about what Scripture was trying to say to them.

It was noticed from the very earliest centuries of Christian history, for example, that the four gospels do not report the career of Jesus in the same way, that they contain major discrepancies about where he went and in what order, what he did, and what he said. I told you last week that the famous miracle of turning water into wine, which John says was Jesus first miracle, is not reported in any of the other gospels. The scene from Luke we read this morning is reported much later in the narrative by Mark and Matthew. The Bible is such a poorly edited, self-contradictory set of books that it demands that we understand that we are not simply reading, we are always, always interpreting.

And so how do we know when we are interpreting correctly? I think there may be some general rules, but they have to do not with procedures for proper interpretation, but rather with the results of our interpretations.

First, we need to be conscious of our interpretive methods, and we need to be honest about when we our interpretations suit our own selfish interests a little too conveniently. The people who used Scripture to justify the institution of slavery (and they included leaders of the Episcopal Church, some of whom owned slaves) could have used a little more skepticism about their own motives.

Second, we need to look at our interpretations and ask whether they lead us to further or lessen the oppression of others. Yes, we can read in the Bible that women

should be silent in church, and in fact silent period, but we clearly understand today that it would be oppressive to take that as an eternal truth. It has taken us way too many centuries to understand that oppression of women is a sin, that it expressly contradicts Jesus' announcement that his ministry is about releasing the captives and letting the oppressed go free.

And finally, we need to ask ourselves whether our interpretations support the transformed way of being human that Jesus tried to teach us, the transformed way of life for which he died, or whether our interpretations support the status quo with all its injustice, all its selfishness, all its systemic cruelty and habits of human degradation. We need to ask ourselves whether our interpretations lead to a better world for everyone, including the oppressed and the vulnerable, or whether they offer a better world just for ourselves. Because if there is one thing the Bible is *not* about it is the well-being of the self at the expense of others. If there is another thing the Bible is *not* about it is staying the same and avoiding the difficult work of transformation.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke's account of Jesus' ministry begins with fulfillment, but we know now, as the church, that that fulfillment continues to this day, through us. We are Christ's body in a world that is still suffering from poverty, oppression, and blindness. Let the scripture be fulfilled in us and in those to whom we spread the word. Let this day and every day be holy to our Lord, holy to the purposes for which God intends us—for the joy of the Lord is our strength.