

St. Andrew's Sermons
The Rev. John Rohrs
January 23, 2022

The other day I was at an ecumenical gathering, and I struck up a conversation with a Lutheran pastor. I asked him how his church had been managing during this long pandemic, and his answer was interesting. He said of course it had been hard; they had really struggled and their membership had declined, but then he said something surprising. He said that he was grateful for their struggle because it had forced them to remember who they are, and who they're called to be.

It was a beautiful perspective, and a truthful one. As unwelcome as it is, sometimes hardship reminds us what really matters. It sort of strips away everything that isn't essential. I didn't have time to follow up, but I would have been interested to hear what they discovered at the core of their mission. It's a good question for all of us to ponder, and I raise it because it resonates with our gospel today. To me, this passage from Luke is the absolute heart of Scripture. If I had to pick one story that sums up the meaning and message of Jesus, this is the one.

It's the first record we have of him addressing a crowd, in his hometown synagogue no less. It's like his opening statement, and he must have chosen it carefully. This is Jesus' chance to define who he is and what his life will be about.

It's a passage from the prophet Isaiah. He picks out that particular scroll out of all the scrolls, and he reads it aloud: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then he sits down. Everyone's quiet, wondering why he chose that passage. Jesus looks at them and says, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Now, a little background. This passage refers to an ancient tradition called the Jubilee. It came once every fifty years; it was a time of forgiveness and restoration. Prisoners were released, debts were forgiven, food and land were redistributed so that every person and every community got a fresh start.

So, Jesus reads this description of Jubilee, and then he says it is fulfilled. In other words, he proclaims a Jubilee, but more than that he suggests that he will usher it in through his own life. It's like he IS the Jubilee, not just for a year and not just for some people, but forever and for all.

Jesus seems to be saying that this vision – this expression of forgiveness and wholeness and equity – this is the very substance of the dream of God. Jesus came into the world to proclaim the Jubilee, to become the Jubilee, and to invite us to share in that transformation. When you strip everything else away, that's what the gospel is about. And we are part of the invitation. We've had some things stripped away here too; we can't worship in person; we can't host all the programs and parties that we'd love to do. But we are still sharing in this dream. By caring for each other and caring for our neighbors, by proclaiming the transformative love of God, especially in this difficult moment, we are living the Jubilee. What a gift to remember why we're here and what this is all about. Today this Scripture is fulfilled in our hearing. We are part of God's Jubilee. Amen.