

PILGRIM C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

FULFILLING THE SCRIPTURES

Luke 4: 14 – 21 January 24, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returns home. He comes from Capernaum, where he is now living, back to Galilee. His home town, Nazareth, is there in Galilee. People hear of his return. The text for today says “he was praised by everyone.” What a great feeling that must have given Jesus and his family. Praise for what we do is usually helpful, but praise from those who know us best is most important.

Our text says that here, at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus receives wide spread, positive response – he is praised by everyone. He comes home to Nazareth where he played as a child. He worked in the community. The faces of the people are familiar. He knows their names. Many of them are kin to him – aunts, uncles, cousins. On the Sabbath, as was his custom, he attends synagogue. It is the day of rest, the day of worship. The Sabbath meant that no one worked and it also included worship. Worship at the synagogue would include”

- 1 – recitation of the Shema (Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One)
- 2 – pray while facing Jerusalem
- 3 – Amen response from the congregation
- 4 – reading from sections of the scroll of the Torah and the Prophets
- 5 – sermon
- 6 – benediction

Any male could volunteer or be asked to pray, read scripture or even give the Sermon.

On this particular Sabbath, Jesus volunteers to read the section from the Prophets. He would stand to read on a special platform, as was the custom. Most likely, Jesus was given the scroll he requested – the scroll of Isaiah. He unrolled the scroll and finds the place and begins to read. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release the release of the prisoners of war and the recovering of sight to the blind, and to set a liberty those who are oppressed.”

We should know today that this passage was already in circulation in the Qumran Community as an important reference to the Torch of Righteousness. These words had been attached to the description of the coming One already familiar to those worshipping in the synagogue. This is a dramatic moment for them. It is a defining moment in the life of Jesus. Jesus rolls the scroll, returns it to the attendant, and sits down. (Know that when a Rabbi taught, he would always sit down.) The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then Jesus speaks from his place of sitting – “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

To read those words aloud before your own relatives and friends in your home town synagogue would take a lot of courage. Jesus is saying his life work will be:

- To heal the brokenhearted
- Announce the release of prisoners of war
- Recovery of sight for the blind
- Announce the acceptable year of the Lord.

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Jesus is saying to these neighbors, relatives, they can no longer see him as a village carpenter or as Joseph and Mary's boy. He is the one they have been waiting to come all their lives – for generations. This carpenter's son is the Messiah.

The scripture is fulfilled. Not just this promised Messiah. But in this day there will be Good News to the poor. Those blinded by the law or their own self importance will be able to see. The broken hearted in Haiti will receive help. The prisoners at Guantanamo will be released. There will be health care for the poor. People of color will not be discriminated against because of their color. Those with AIDS will not be cast out of their communities. Elderly adults and children will be treated with respect. Gays and lesbians will be given equal rights and privileges. You can make your list as long as you want it and we can celebrate that we have made beginnings. We also know that we have a long way to go to usher in this new age Jesus talks about.

It is popular in American culture these days to lift up the importance of knowing and clarifying one's purpose and how we work to accomplish that purpose. I have heard many adults in position of leadership say to young people, "You can be anything you want to be." Go to any book store and you will find racks of books with advice on how to achieve your purpose. There are books for everyone – business, sports, politics, relationships and religion. You can even employ a "life coach." One of the big sellers today in religion is "THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE" by Rick Warren – pastor of a mega church in California. It is troubling to me that that book makes no mention of this powerful statement of Jesus here in John, as to who he is and his purpose.

How did Jesus set about fulfilling the scripture. Look at his life and his work. He challenged the political and religious society at the very points it failed to care for those pushed out of society. He associated with tax collectors and sinners. The common people heard him gladly. Jesus did not see himself as a political organizer, nor did he see himself as a conquering hero. Instead he tried to be true to this purpose he read that day in the synagogue at Nazareth.

Today, we have annual meeting after worship. We will elect officials for the coming year, pass a budget, and do some considering of our future and our new space. I believe all those are good and helpful things for us. More important, they will help us fulfill the scripture as we read and interpret it. Let us stay true to our insistence that God is Still Speaking. Let us continue our welcoming everyone to our community of faith as they search for the purpose of God in their own life. Let us not be afraid to welcome those that society would like to forget. Let us gather courage and strength from this vision and purpose Jesus took upon himself. Let this fulfilling of the scripture become important to us as we seek to be the church in our own day.