

January 24, 2016 - Epiphany 4C

“A Jubilee Year, Every Year”

Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-11; 1 Corinthians 12:12-25; Luke 4:13-21

Today, Jesus says,

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

(Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus is speaking to the kind of community God wishes for us here on earth when he says this to the congregation. The Lord wishes for us to live in a world where the poor hear and receive good news, where prisoners and captives know freedom and liberation, where the blind see and the oppressed are liberated, and where the people know the Lord’s favor. Jesus is quoting Isaiah and so this a prophetic word to the people of Nazareth and also to us.

Prophecy is, according to Luciano Pacomio, the interpretation of *“that which has been experienced”*<sup>1</sup>. Jesus says,

*“Today, this Word has been fulfilled in your hearing”,*

*or “If you are hearing this verse, it is fulfilled because you have heard it read by me”.*

We, those who have heard these words today, along with that synagogue in Nazareth, are hearing the words of the Prophet Isaiah as an interpretation on what we have experienced by way of Jesus Christ. As a community we are defined and called together by Jesus and we testify to that definition and calling whenever we say our Covenant together.

The Jubilee Year, or the Year of the Lord’s Favor, that Jesus calls for, is a time of the forgiveness of all debt, the return of all land to those who have used it as collateral, the freedom of all those who are indentured and enslaved to their homes and families, and the time of land laying fallow for a full year. The Jubilee year is also a call and definition of what it means to be a community of those who await the Kingdom of God.

What does it mean to await the Kingdom of God as Christ’s gathered community? According to Jesus today, it means that every year, every time someone hears these words of Isaiah, the Jubilee Year has begun. So today, the Year of Jubilee has begun for us, for in our hearing these words have been fulfilled in the presence of Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit which returned Jesus to Nazareth and Galilee.

Let me give you a quick definition of what it means to be a community of God based on Jesus’ reading of Isaiah today.

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<sup>1</sup> from an online article entitled “The Jubilee In the Bible” by Luciano Pacomio. Accessed on 01/18/2016 at [www.holysee.org](http://www.holysee.org).

*We are a Prophetic Community which is transformed by the interpretation of God's Word and Presence through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to enact God's transforming Kingdom today.*

A community which is prophetic, transformed and transforming is what each of our readings are about today. Prophecy is the liberating work of interpretation of our personal and subjective experience in relationship to the enveloping and global presence of God's presence and Word. Transformation is the fulfilling work of engaging and seeking God's Kingdom as a community of faith even in the midst of a difficult world.

In Nehemiah 8, we see the people of God beginning to remember they are a Prophetic Community. Before this moment, they only know themselves as freed slaves from Babylon by Cyrus. Back in Babylon, in captivity, the people forgot who they were. Vague stories would float about that they were a holy people who had been freed from slavery by God long ago in Egypt. Now they were freed again. Nehemiah, a prophet who interpreted the experience of his people, was called by God to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and so he gathered up a large group of families to help with that project. While some of these helpers were digging through the rubble (Babylonian warriors were known for leveling entire cities as a sign they had been there), one of the men discovered a book inside the walls of a palace. It was the Torah, the book of the Law.

All the people knew this was important and that the book may have some clues about who they were and who they were meant to be. And so the people - *the people* - called for Ezra the priest to read from the Torah to the people. They were hearing it for the first time. The priests before this point were operating from memory and oral tradition. They at least knew just a little bit more than the people around them. Ezra had the priests spread out through the crowd, forming loose, small groups among the people. And so Ezra read a passage out loud. The priests heard the reading and then turned to their small group and interpreted the reading for them.

*They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8)*

*"The reading says this....and it means this..."* People would ask questions and the small groups would discuss it. Then Ezra would read another passage, and the interpretation would happen again. When they were done, Ezra called for a celebration, for *"the joy of the Lord is your strength...for this day is holy; do not be grieved."*

This is, in my mind, one of the most powerful scenes in Scripture, because it gives a framework for how we begin to inhabit the Kingdom of God as a community. This is what Jesus is calling his home synagogue to - the Kingdom of God. We are called to interpret God's work in our lives and in the words we hear from God. And if we are truly interpreting God's Word, we will be transformed by it, made holy by that interpretive work. This is what it means to be a prophetic community of God - to interpret the presence of God in our life experience and show one another how we have been transformed by it. This is continual, ongoing, year to year, work. There is no 'final understanding' or 'one true interpretation' because we are continually

transformed by God's presence and thus are not the same people hearing God's word to us from one day to the next, from one year to the next.

Paul understands this well in 1 Corinthians 12, which we recited in our Call to Worship this morning. By our commitment to the faith through our baptism and our reaffirmation each week as we participate in the new life of Christ, we allow our lives to be *enfolded* into the "one body" of the community of faith.

*"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body— Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit."* (1 Corinthians 12:13)

This 'one body' of you and me and all of us join together and interpret what the Lord has done for us during the week upon our hearing of God's Word and Jesus' fulfillment of that Word in the world. Just like the people who gather together at the Water Gate in Jerusalem, we gather to hear God's word and its interpretation. This is the work of the prophet and it is what makes every Christian community a prophetic community.

When Kate and I returned to the faith, we joined Colonial Church of Edina in Minnesota. We joined just as they were forming small group ministries, a little bit like house churches within the larger church. Part of the motivation for this was Nehemiah 8, and an understanding from 1 Corinthians 12 that the body that communicates with other parts of the body works better as one body of faith. Colonial was a large church when we started so there were quite a few house groups that were formed at that time, more than 20 if I am not mistaken. Our group and one another were the only ones functioning after a year. Our group of five families went through a lot together and we still stay in touch with one another. In the beginning, we gathered twice a month and we did what my definition of a community of God says a Christian community does. We got together and interpreted our experience through the lens of our lives with God and Christ and in relationship to God's Word, and then we reflected on how we had been transformed by that experience. In doing so, we, as a smaller body within the bigger church body, were transformed. It was quite a beautiful thing.

When a prophetic community of God's people commit to being 'one body' by the power of the Holy Spirit, things change. People change. Communities are changed. Our small group, for the years we were involved with it, became an oasis and place of rest in the midst of all kinds of difficulties and tragedies and personal decisions.

And this is another aspect of the Jubilee Year that is important. If a Jubilee Year is all about how we are going to live together as a community of God's people, then it is also all about what the Lord has given us. Another way of saying "Jubilee Year" is "Sabbath Year". Just as on the 7th day we are called to rest by God, and in the 7th week after Passover we celebrate Pentecost, and in the 7th year the grounds are to be rotated and laid fallow, so also in the 7th upon 7th year - the 50th year, we celebrate the Year of Jubilee, the year of rest.

So when you hear Jesus' words today, they also need to be heard in the context of Sabbath. Remember his words from the Gospel of Matthew,

*“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.<sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.<sup>30</sup> For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*  
(Matthew 11:28-30)

This is part of what it means to live as the ‘one body’ of Christ, to take the burdens of one another and make them light, to help one another find rest for our souls. And this is how the world is transformed - by being enfolded into the body of Christ so that we can live in a Sabbath worldview, in a Sabbath community.

This is the nature of God’s Kingdom, and a great paradox, is it not? The work of the people of God is to find liberation, healing and rest for the world in the Kingdom of God. We work to find, proclaim and provide the rest of the Lord, the Sabbath of God for the people of God.

What then does it mean to live in the Jubilee Year, every year? It means that whenever this word of God is heard, the presence of Christ is fulfilled and we are transformed. Since we are a community of God gathered under the promises of Jesus Christ, we are continually called to interpret the words of God and our experience of God in order to transform the world into the continually changing, growing, expanding Kingdom of God. This is the work of transformation, where the poor experience good news, where prisoners are freed, where the blind see, where the oppressed are liberated and where this happens continually and all are brought into the rest and consolation of the Lord, who, as we said two weeks ago, is well-pleased with you, and as we said last week, takes joy in you.

Interpretation and transformation are our work when we experience the presence of Christ. This is the work of the prophet and the person of faith. This doesn’t work out well for Jesus in his hometown, though. People are not going to always like how we understand God’s word to us, as a prophetic community. Sometimes, the person we become, the transformation we experience, will make the people who used to know you very upset. But we are not doing this just for the fun of it. Nor are we a social club.

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Jesus’ town tries to stone him to death after his pronouncement today. Why? Because they didn’t want to be an interpretive community who is continually transformed by God’s earthly presence. They thought they had the “right” interpretation and transformation was for everyone else so those people could become like them. As these hearers understood it, God’s Word and prophecy was not so they could reach out to those who were not like them.

One of my teachers at Luther Seminary puts the problem this way:

*What will it take for you to believe that you don't need a life-improvement program, but a life-change? We are far more comfortable with talking about the gospel as a self-help, self-improvement project; a step-by-step guide to being a better Christian, a better disciple, a better pastor, a better preacher; some good advice as to how to grow a bigger church, bigger programming, and a bigger budget. But Jesus' sermon in Nazareth is not for those who want to make their lives better but for those who need to be set free to live the life God wants for them, the life God sees as possible for them, the life they want to live, but have never known the freedom to make it happen - or never been given the gift and opportunity to imagine it.<sup>2</sup>*

*"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing",* Jesus says today.

Gather together, like the people of Jerusalem and interpret what you have heard, trusting that the joy of the Lord is your strength, for it is in the act of interpretation that we are enfolded into the one body of the Holy Spirit.

And in that place, not only are we transformed, but so is the whole world. We will begin to look at one another, the world and ourselves as deserving of freedom, fellowship, faith and fulfillment, because in the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world, in the epiphany of God through God's Son to each of us, God's Kingdom is made known now.

And that is how every year becomes a Jubilee Year, a year of the Lord's favor.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> "A Life-Changing Epiphany" by Karoline Lewis. Accessed at Working Preacher, [www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4248](http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4248) on 1/18/2016.