

## **Jesus' Mission Statement, Epiphany 3 (C) – January 26, 2025 – Luke 4:14-21**

Today's gospel presents us with Jesus' first act of public ministry, described for us in Luke's gospel. Following his river baptism and his long wilderness fast and temptation, Jesus returns to his home country, Galilee. Reports about him have been spreading through the population, probably the result of his healing miracles and his synagogue teaching.

So when he comes back home, it's quite a big day in the synagogue. Everybody's there, eager to hear the local boy who's making such a name for himself.

Jesus enters the synagogue on that Sabbath morning. It seems smaller than it looked when he was a child, but otherwise nothing about this familiar place has changed.

Joseph and Mary prepared him well for life. They raised him faithfully in their ancestral religion. He regularly attended Sabbath school and youth group; they brought him to the synagogue every week – as a baby, a child, a teenager.

It wasn't always easy, especially when he was a baby. And so Joseph and Mary must be patron saints for all the parents now who bring their babies to worship, who make sure their children get to church school, who see their sons and daughters belong to youth group. It's not easy. But these parents know that the child who participates regularly in the community of God's people is likely to have a strong faith in adulthood and a firm foundation during every crisis of life.

So Jesus returns to the Nazareth synagogue, thankful for the upbringing he received there. He is asked to read the lesson from the prophets. There is no lectionary to consult to determine this reading; the choice is up to him. Nor is there a book to flip through. Instead, a bulky scroll is brought to him and placed upon the lectern. Jesus, searching for a familiar text, unrolls it to a place near the end of the scroll. In a voice strong with anticipation, he reads aloud these words:

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

Finished with this brief passage, Jesus rolls up the scroll, returns it to the attendant, and takes his seat.

It is the custom for teachers to sit, rather than to stand, so when Jesus sits, everyone looks at him, expecting some commentary, some explication of this text, a text well known to many of them.

There are no professional clergy. The synagogue president can invite any appropriate person to comment on the text. Often these remarks are less than inspiring. While the people are biblically literate, commentary on scripture by such speakers is often no more than rote recitation of lessons all of them learned at an early age. So the congregation usually knows what will be said before it is said, and the only question is whether it will be said correctly or not.

Not so today when Jesus sits down. The people are all looking at him. He looks around at them, those familiar faces from his early years, older in appearance than before: his childhood friends, now present with their children; the parents of his friends, now senior citizens.

He begins with a zinger, and something much more than a zinger – a sentence that remains fresh and provocative down to our own time. Jesus sets free the scripture passage he has just read; he lets the lion out of its cage; he overthrows the ho-hum expectations of the people around him. Here is what he says: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Jesus does the unexpected, the unimaginable, on that memorable Sabbath morning in Nazareth. In today's jargon, he claims those ancient prophetic words as his own personal mission statement. The reason God's Spirit came crashing down on him at his baptism was to empower him to do precisely this: bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; let all the oppressed go free; announce the sweet Jubilee Year when God's justice will reshape society.

Jesus takes all this as his mission statement, and he is not content to leave it as only a string of high-sounding words. Everything that follows in his life, as presented to us in the gospel, amounts to the living out of the prophecy he claims for himself that Sabbath morning in Nazareth.

I don't know if you have been following the news about the inauguration of the President of the US. Personally, I did not watch any aspect of it. Afterwards I heard about the very directed address to Trump from Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde the Episcopalian Bishop of the Diocese of Washington. This happened at the Inaugural Prayer Service on Tuesday. During her sermon she ended her remarks by talking directly to Donald Trump saying:

“Let me make one final plea. Mr. President, millions have put their trust in you. And as you told the nation yesterday, you have felt the providential hand of a loving God. In the name of our God, **I ask you to have mercy upon the people** in our country who are scared now. There are gay, lesbian and transgender children in Democratic, Republican and independent families, some who fear for their lives. In the name of our God, I ask you to have mercy upon the people in our country. We're scared now. The

people who pick our crops and clean our office buildings, who labor in poultry farms and meatpacking plants, who wash the dishes after we eat in restaurants and work the night shifts in hospitals. They may not be citizens or have the proper documentation, but the vast majority of immigrants are not criminals. They pay taxes, and are good neighbors. They are faithful members of our churches and mosques, synagogues, gurdwara, and temples. **I ask you to have mercy**, Mr. President, on those in our communities whose children fear that their parents will be taken away, and that you help those who are fleeing war zones and persecution in their own lands to find compassion and welcome here.

The Bishop pleaded for mercy for those who are on the radar for unforeseen persecution and cannot speak for themselves. It is what the gospel calls us to do. In today's text, Jesus entered the synagogue, unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup> "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, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

In the gospel today Jesus speaks that he is coming to bring mercy to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free. He not only speaks to the people in the synagogue. He calls us to action, to mission. We may not want to hear what Jesus speaks but that is our issue. When we are not following God's commands our guilt can get in the way of our comfort.

The way God works is through his mystical body, the church. Through each of us and all who are baptized into his body, Jesus strives still to live out his mission statement, bringing good news to those who don't have any, setting free those chained in captivity, opening blind eyes, helping the oppressed and exploited find a life, and unrolling the floor plan that sets out God's reign where justice and peace prevail.

Jesus still does these things, because his church does them. The poor gain hope, whether it's their souls or their bodies that are starved. The captives experience freedom, whether they are prisoners in a jail or prisoners in a mansion. The blind receive sight, whether it's cataract surgery at the church hospital or the scales of prejudice falling off the eyes of a bigot. The oppressed are set free, whether oppression is a political regime or a chemical dependence. When Jesus reads that passage in the Nazareth synagogue, he announces a mission statement for himself and for his body, the church.

Today's reading from First Corinthians is another important passage about how the Body of Christ, the church, is to live out the mission statement of Jesus. As we strive to keep faithful to those words Jesus read aloud and lived out, we can pay attention to three points that St. Paul insists on in that passage:

**Number One:**

All members of the church have gifts for ministry.

**Number Two:**

The members of the church have different gifts for ministry; we are not clones of each other.

**Number Three:**

The different gifts come to life in the context of the whole. May we the members of the Church share our gifts with one another and the world so that the mission we have encouraged with, may be lived out in its fullness. Amen.