

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who is the fulfillment of all scripture, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

Wow it's good to be back together again.! It seems like forever since I've been in this pulpit proclaiming the Good News. I've felt very strange and sort of lost these last two weeks. My life isn't the same without the regular cycle of worship together with all of you. I can read scripture and study the Bible and pray and even sing my favorite hymns at home, but nothing and I mean nothing, takes the place of what we do right here each Sunday, weather permitting...

I feel I bit like I did back in the winter of 1978 when we had the big snow storm. (SLIDE) The way I remember it we had several big snow storms back to back. We didn't have a full week of classes at Kent State the entire Winter Quarter. Every time when we'd come back after a couple of snow days my Organic Chemistry professor would say something like, "I know when we last me we were on chapter 3, but I continued on and today we're on Chapter 5. He expected us to have also continued and, well, I was lost most of that quarter and my grade in that class showed...

(SLIDE) We've missed a couple of weeks and our Lectionary has continued moving on. We missed Jesus' being Baptized by John the Baptist and His first miracle when He changed water into the best wine ever at the wedding party in

Cana. In the meantime, Jesus has been preaching, teaching, and doing miracles in the surrounding region of Galilee. Today, He has returned to his home town where he was raised and takes his place in the local Synagogue. Today's story is part one of a two-part story. Today, Jesus reads from the scroll of the Book of Isaiah, then sits down and preaches. Next week we get to hear the hometown crowd's reaction to his first public sermon, according to Luke. I hope we don't have a weather related cancellation next week or you might not get to hear what happens after Jesus preaches to his homies. For today we're going to take a closer look at this first half of the story.

Today. Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah and the first word out of his mouth is the word "today." "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." The English translation doesn't do us any favors in trying to understand what Jesus meant. By all appearances, on that day it probably would not have seemed to anyone in attendance the things Isaiah proclaimed had actually, literally come about. Maybe it's as simple as Jesus announcing in his very person, Isaiah's message to share God's word of liberty and grace and healing with all people – and especially with those who are most vulnerable and in need – is made manifest. Maybe this speech is about himself, the living Word of God who had come to dwell with us as John's Gospel tells us. Or maybe Jesus came to be God-with-us even to the end of the ages as Matthew's Gospel says. Who ever is writing and

telling the story of Jesus, He is the living and breathing fulfillment of God's promise to rescue and redeem all people, especially those standing in the shadows and on the margins as we hear in both Isaiah's prophecy and from Luke's version of the Gospel.

Maybe... Or maybe "today" isn't a static term or a marker of time, but rather a far more dynamic, active, and tensive, as in "today is just the beginning." As it turns out, the tense of Jesus' declaration that "the Scripture has been fulfilled" isn't the once and done present tense or the singular past tense, but rather the ongoing, even repetitive, and definitely re-occurring perfect tense. So, Jesus is kind of saying, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled and continues to be fulfilled and will keep being fulfilled and therefore will keep needing to be fulfilled in your presence." It can only be fulfilled in your presence. Without you there is no fulfillment of the mission of Jesus Christ.

Which is why the first word Jesus spoke after reading from Scripture strikes me as such an important word for us, today. It struck me first because we haven't been able to be together in His presence for a while, but also because by all outward appearances, Isaiah's promises are not particularly or obviously fulfilled in our world right now either. At least if we understand "fulfilled" merely as present tense or past tense. In the Greek Perfect Tense, we're pushed to see Jesus' words simultaneously in three very different ways. First his words declare a fact

about God. In Jesus, God acts on behalf of those in need. Secondly, as a promise. God will continue to take the side of the vulnerable and those in need. Third, as an invitation. We are called to this same work of embodying, manifesting, and fulfilling God's declaration and promise now and forever, until Jesus returns.

Truthfully, I think I do better with the declaration and promise than the invitation. I mean, it's easy to preach about all the wonderful things God has done. Declaring the mighty acts of God in the past is easy... It's also easy to preach on the promise of God to continue doing those wonderful deeds into the future... I think we all get those two approaches. We've all heard great sermons on what God has done and on the great promises of God. The part none of us really likes or cares to hear is the invitation for us to get involved. As in "you are expressly invited to be part of God's fulfillment of God's promises. Today. Tomorrow. And the next day." The invitation can be daunting, leading to a variety of self-doubting questions: Me, us, really? Have you been paying attention? The problems seem so big and I'm already so busy! But, think about it... The invitation can also be empowering: Me, us, really? I can make a difference? You mean the small things even the small things I can do really matter? Yes! You do matter! God is at work in our lives and our relationships for the sake of the world? Now that's really cool!

This week I found a poem called “The Work of Christmas” by Howard Thurman that speaks to the invitation, the opportunity we have to jump in and do the job that Jesus began and left to the Church to continue. It goes like this:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

We’re now a month beyond our celebration of Jesus’ birth. Christmas seems like a distant memory. Even so, we who love that newborn babe of Bethlehem continue to try to understand the implications of God’s invasion of humanity through the Word made flesh. The 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany seems like just the right time to hear it again. Thurman’s poem is definitely challenging, as it calls us to something that, if taken seriously, is daunting, but it’s also empowering. It calls us to something worthwhile and it gives us the confidence that we can do it. Which is the way, when you think about it, the Gospel pretty much always works. We’re invited into the mission God came here to instigate. He left us, his followers, in charge of that mission until the day when he returns. So, today in

your hearing of the scripture, God's Word has been fulfilled when ever we remember the wonderful acts of God, when ever we proclaim the great promises of God's salvation and eternal life, and when ever we take up Jesus' invitation to join in and take our part in the fulfillment of God's Word.

May our ministries to and for the poor, the hungry, and all those on the margins of our society be fruitful and pleasing to God. May we be not only challenged by the invitation to join in, but also empowered by the encouraging words of scripture and by our continued fellowship as we gather together in God's name and in His very presence to declare his mighty works, to proclaim His promise of eternal life, and to invite all people into His presence as we share Christ's love to all people. Amen.