



247 Broad Street | Red Bank NJ 0770
(732) 747-0446 | www.umcredbank.org

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Sermon Inaugural

Luke 4:14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "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." 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. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Every good company seems to have a slogan or a tagline. Something that reminds you what this company is about. Let's see if we can come up with some slogans here. I'm loving it. (McDonalds) Melts in your mouth, not in your hand. (M&M's) Think different. (Apple) Just do it! (Nike) Maybe she was born with it. (Maybelline) Slogans need to be catchy, memorable, and ideally convey something important about the product or company.

Now most of those companies have not only a slogan, but also a mission statement. But, as you probably can imagine, mission statements tend to be wordy. Let's see if you can guess what company is behind the following mission statement: 'Our vision is to be the world's best quick service restaurant experience. Being the best means providing outstanding quality, service, cleanliness, and value, so that we make every customer in every restaurant smile.' It's McDonald's! Not quite so hard, right? But not as catchy as a slogan.

Now mission statements tell us more about a company's or an institution's character than a tagline could. We want and need to know a little more. We want certain things to be revealed to us. We see that in politics as well. One reason why we have presidential campaigns, debates, and eventually inaugural speeches, for example, is for us to learn what

the candidates are all about, and what their agenda is going to be. What are they going to focus on?

In today's gospel, Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry, filled with God's Spirit, in a sense gives his own campaign speech; he gives a very clear mission statement, revealing what he is about. This story of Jesus teaching in the synagogue in his hometown can be found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), but Luke does something a little different with it than the other two writers. Luke changes the timing of events, moving this story up in Jesus ministry all the way to the beginning... so as the narrative reads, this happens right out of the gate, right after Jesus is baptized and spends 40 days in the wilderness wrestling with temptation. According to Luke, this is the plumb line of our mission and purpose as followers of Jesus. As we study, interpret, and follow the gospel, we should keep coming back to this text to measure our work, to see how in line we are with Jesus' original mission statement.

So what is it that is lifted up as the mission statement of Jesus? As we read the account, Luke's attention to detail draws us in, allowing us to imagine just what it would look like, as if we were there listening in the front row ourselves. *"He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: It's almost like a conductor tapping the side of the music stand, calling the orchestra to attention for the opening chord of the symphony. '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.'" As he rolled up the scroll, handed it back and took his seat, the eyes of everyone in the room are fixed on him. They can't tear their eyes away! They can tell this is important to him... but not just to him... to them as well. These aren't just any words, a passage chosen at random to read... these are familiar words... These are the words of the prophet that have come to describe the Messiah who they were all waiting for. And to their blank stares of awe and confusion, Jesus says, as he's seated among them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

And when is this mission to be accomplished? Not some future date, but today, NOW. The immediacy and present tense of this statement cannot be overlooked. This liberating word, which Luke reminds us is empowered by the Holy Spirit, is happening here and now through Jesus.

When Jesus spoke of his mission, it seems as though he was describing his ministry as the beginning of a time of Jubilee. Scholar Ruth Anne Reese reminds us that, according to the book of Leviticus, every 50th year was to be set aside as a time of liberation and restoration. While justice was demanded at all times, the Jubilee was the particular time in which slaves were freed and captives restored to their own communities. During the Jubilee, land was to be returned to its original owners (or their heirs). And indentured servants—those

who were enslaved to pay off debts—were to be released from their enslavement. It was designed to be an economic equalizer. It was wealth-sharing.

It's unclear that Jubilee was ever truly observed. It was certainly a religious celebration which began with the sounding of the shofar, the ram's horn, and feasting. But the land returning? Indentured people receiving their freedom? It likely never happened, at least not nationwide. But whether or not it was fully realized, it was at least lifted up as a value, an ideal. Rabbis could make appeals that servants should be released—that they and their children ought to be given their freedom, allowed to start over. They could encourage people not just to buy up and accumulate land, but to have a fairer distribution.

To consider Jubilee means to remember that things are not fair, and that we can and should do something to create more fairness, more justice. And he never forgot that his was a mission of jubilee, for he lived out of that mission for the rest of his earthly life. Jesus connected with the most down-and-out people—the poor, the enslaved, those in need of healing and liberation. He includes those outside the Jewish community. He mingles with lepers, eats with sinners, engages outcasts, embraces women as whole people, consoles the suffering, speaks approvingly of the despised Samaritans, and even at the very end, hanging on the cross, reassures a convicted criminal that TODAY he would be him in paradise.

This jubilee ministry of liberation and justice is fulfilled in Jesus, but we are a people who don't like to share – share power, wealth, or privilege. Just as the Levitical mandate for Jubilee was never fully realized, the fulfillment of this jubilee mission of Jesus is still a work in progress – something that continues today... and there is work for us to do! We, who are called as his followers are also called to his mission, to embody his teachings, to love those he loved, to act on behalf of the dispossessed as he did, to be instruments of hope and justice as he was. His ministry has become our ministry. It is now our calling to release the captives, addressing the mass incarceration of men of color in our nation, and take away the profit making system of the US prison industrial complex. We are to let the oppressed go free, continuing the fight for racial justice and equality as well as full inclusion in our society and our church of our LGBTQ community. We are to bring good news to the poor, lifting up those who are homeless and hungry and ensuring access to affordable housing and healthcare, and dismantle our systems of profit at the expense of people. We are to bring recovery of sight to the blind, changing the way we see those who look/love/act/speak/pray differently than us – so that we can see that there is not a THEM, there is only an US.

God's work is not limited to the years that Jesus physically lived on earth. The Holy Spirit compels and strengthens our generation, and many generations, to bring about God's vision for all people, loving God by loving our neighbors. May we all pick up the mantle of Jesus' jubilee mission statement, and may it be said, "TODAY, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Amen.