

Luke 4: 14-21 "Today!" Rev. Janet Chapman January 27, 2019

It was 264 hours or just over 10 days that I waited for hot water – it is those little things we take for granted that when we don't have them, we miss them like crazy. You see, my hot water heater broke down after a long and happy life, and you would have thought I was trying to replace a spaceship for all the hoops I had to jump through with my home warranty company. Having spent 12.5 hours on hold over the course of 10 days, I could literally hum the background music as I waited. Multi-tasking became an art as I cleaned the kitchen, did sermon research, responded to email, planned yesterday's retreat and so much more. At one point, I delved into the world of business reviews on Yelp, Facebook, and Google and quickly realized I was not the only one who had invested a great deal of time waiting for this company to respond. Ironically, someone sent me a host of jokes last week, one of which hit the nail on the head: "An elderly man went to the doctor's office for his 2 pm appointment. After 3 hours of waiting, he got up to leave. As he passed the receptionist, he told her, 'I guess I'll go home and die a natural death there instead.'" To say the least, I will be ecstatic to finally hear the words, "We are installing your hot water heater today!"

Today can be a wonderful word for those of us who are anxiously waiting. Other than reading from the prophet Isaiah, it is the first word spoken by the public Jesus in Luke's Gospel. "Today," not yesterday nor tomorrow, not someday, but today. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Too often, prophetic words are followed by those who answer, "Tomorrow," "It's too soon," "Not yet," or simply "Wait." The immediacy of Jesus' first word sets the tone for all of Luke's Gospel, where "today" is always the day to release the captives, to give sight to the blind, to free the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. But we

are getting ahead of ourselves a bit. Going back to the story, it begins with a rather dull, typical event in ancient Jewish synagogue life. On the Sabbath, a preacher, not a rabbi or some other formal religious authority, but a person known as a “darshanim,” a “speaker” or a “teller” reads from the scroll and comments on the verses. This practice was widely practiced and expected by congregations in Jesus’ day – that the speaker would take biblical verses literally out of their textual and historical context and apply them to the religious, political, and ethical questions of the day. This was something not near as dangerous as it is today because of the similarities of the cultures from century to century. Still, preaching involved making an ancient story, the wisdom of the prophets, come alive for the day.

Diana Butler Bass invites us to imagine what might be going through the worshippers’ minds? What will Jesus say? Will he address the occupation, the oppression of the Roman empire, or perhaps his own ministry that is gaining attention in the region? Will he reflect on the wisdom of the old prophet saying, “In the past, our fathers and mothers envisioned a world of justice, freedom, and healing. They dreamt of abundant living in a land of milk and honey as God covenanted with Moses”? Or will he elaborate on the world to come saying “One day, the poor will be lifted up, captives set free, and the blind will see! How we pray for that...but how slow it seems in coming!”? Will Jesus talk of the past or the future, connecting with nostalgia or hope? But he does neither. He says, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Wait, what? They were shocked, especially the ones who sat in the back and enjoyed critiquing the preacher of the day. You can almost hear the murmuring, “He didn’t say anything about forgiveness, and not a word about sin.” Then a seminary professor sitting with them says, “Wait a minute, you don’t have to say everything you know in one sermon.” Some laugh but

others don't think it is so funny. So what does he mean that the Spirit of the Lord is Here, Now, Today? That the poor hear good news, the captives are being released, the blind see, and the oppressed receive justice. Another voice whispers, "Well, aren't we all captive to something?" Everyone brightens up as someone says, "Yeah, we are all captives." "I'm captive to Netflix" one says while another nods saying, "I'm captive to my job." "I guess God comes to set us free from all of these so Jesus was talking about salvation and forgiveness after all." They all seem relieved and continue the conversation until the custodian comes in to clean up. He asks if they can continue their conversation elsewhere so he can lock up? He picks up the discarded bulletins, turns off the lights, until only the lights at the very front shine on the place where Jesus stood to read. The words of Isaiah echo in the empty room, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." "Can it be true?" the custodian whispers, then he locks the doors and heads out.

Of course, we have no idea if any of this would happen. We hope that if Jesus ever came to our church, we would listen eagerly and no one would murmur or be skeptical. But our problem is that many of us are way too consumed with our past, trying to maintain buildings and structures, of teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from our ancestors. Or the exact opposite is true. Our hopes for the future get wrapped up in hopes for salvation and eternal life, desires for answered prayers, for the children to hold onto their faith or "come back to church." Although both the past and the future are important, today is Jesus' first word, it is the first word remembered this side of the wilderness and it sets the foundation for Jesus' ministry. Today this word is fulfilled. Barbara Lundblad asserts that "Today" is the most radical thing Jesus ever said. It dramatically changes things – nothing will be the same.

Today insists that we lay aside both our memories and our dreams to embrace fully the moment of now. Essentially Jesus is telling his friends, “Look around you, see the Spirit of God at work, right here, right now. God is with us. Just as the one called ‘I AM’ promised our father Moses at the burning bush, ‘I will be with you,’ this will be a sign of God’s covenant. The ever active, ever loving, ever liberating, always present God is here with us. Now. Today.”

His statement is earth-shattering, whether taken literally or metaphorically. The skeptics among us feel better about the idea of being freed from those spiritual temptations and addictions that have imprisoned us, those perspectives that have made us blind, those oppressive systems which have kept us powerless. But what if Jesus was speaking literally? That is far more difficult to swallow – surely Jesus wasn’t telling us to open the prison doors and let everyone inside go free? Things have changed since Jesus’ time. We don’t live in a time when people are imprisoned simply because of their nationality, because they fled persecution or death as Jesus’ parents did in order to protect Jesus’ life, where hundreds of refugees are being detained without legal counsel for years on end as close to us as the Yuba County Jail in Marysville. We don’t live in a time when adequate medical care is denied to the poor, the homeless, and the stranger. We don’t live in a time when the mentally ill are so stigmatized that they are ostracized from society and discouraged from treatment. We don’t live in a time when the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and government leaders work to protect themselves in order to ensure their futures. That was then - not today. But Jesus says to those of us sitting here listening to the scripture, it is not yesterday, not tomorrow, but Today... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today – this now – is the kingdom of God. This is the year of God’s favor. Living in God’s promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about

waiting for some distant Messiah and eternal life to come. It is about now and it is such a hard truth to hear and receive, that later in chapter 4, Jesus' neighbors and friends try to throw him off a cliff. They would rather stay mired in nostalgia and complain about the future than recognize and do something about the kingdom Today. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has appointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us 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...Today this scripture has been fulfilled in our lives in our hearing." Today, not in the dim past, not in the distant future. Today, may it be so among us.