

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

A Scripture Fulfilled

Luke 4

January 30, 2022

In our Gospel reading this morning in Luke 4, we see Jesus in a synagogue reading from the prophets. This is New Testament reading Old Testament. Our scripture is about Jesus reading Scripture. The enfleshed Word of God reading from the written Word of God. It's a reading of scripture about what happens when people read scripture.

Do we even know how to read scripture? I think, if we're being honest a lot of us don't, not really. We know how to read, most of us. Some of us are still learning. But reading is never just about being able to pronounce the words on the page though that's a good start. Reading involves comprehension—understanding the meaning of the words you're reading. Sometimes we can do that on our own, sometimes we need a guide, whether it's *Do You Like My Hat? Or War and Peace*.

When we read Scripture, there's even more going on, something mystical. It's not just being able to pronounce the words, not just knowing what the words signify, it's also an experience of meditation that leads to contemplation, that leads to response.

In this story, the people hearing Jesus read Isaiah experienced all of that, even response. I mean, their response was to try to throw Jesus off a cliff, but you know, at least they responded somehow. At least something stirred within them.

The pacing of the story as it is told is deliberate and methodical. All the details and pacing slow you down.

*And Jesus came to Nazareth
Where he had been brought up
And as was his custom
He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day
And 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.*

You can hear his sandaled footsteps slap lightly the pavement. You can hear the parchment crinkle as it is unrolled. You can hear his finger slide down the lines of Hebrew on the page. You can hear the silence in the air as he begins to read.

We learn something here about reading Scripture as a holy word. We don't just sit down, flop open our Bibles, and scan something quickly, letting it sprint through our consciousness like a

fleeting thought or begrudging duty. We're trained to read everything and see everything quickly and shallow these days. Click, scan, click, swipe, click, scan. College students increasingly report that they get to college not knowing how to read. I don't mean they literally don't know how to read the words on the page. Though that's probably also true sadly sometimes. What I mean is that they realize that they have a 25-page chapter assignment to read this week, and they simply cannot do it. They can't stay focused long enough to get through it, much less to read it for depth of meaning. It's a real challenge we face to learn to read, really read, really let the words do their work on us. This is especially true of Scripture, which we tend to consume in bite size portions, if at all.

Look how this story unfolds though. There is preparation. We don't just flop down to read scripture if we're going to get anything from it. We prepare. Take some deep breaths. Have a ritual. Pause, Go slowly. Scripture is not fast food, empty calories to be consumed quickly and forgotten until you get heart disease. This bread of life is to be chewed, savored, taken in, as your heart is healed.

Even after the reading from Isaiah, the pace of Luke's telling continues.

*And he rolled up the scroll
And gave it back to the attendant
And sat down.*

Sitting down wasn't a dramatic act; it was the normal place for teachers to sit. You stand to read the Scripture; then you sit to teach. Jesus sat to teach, but he didn't yet speak. Silence.

Silence is the first response to reading the Word. *Be still and know that I am God.*

He sat down

And all the eyes of the synagogue were fixed on him. They were fastened on him.

After the reading, the **lectio**, this is the moment of **meditation**. You hear the Scripture, and you are alert. The word fixed [*atenizo*] looks like the English word attention. To pay attention. You are paying attention now. Your mind is engaged. You are ready to hear what's next.

The Isaiah text Jesus read that day is a powerful reading. It was a promise to a suffering people that their suffering would soon come to an end. Suffering can hurt in many ways. The poor are the subject of Isaiah's promises. It reads like the words of a messiah, *The Spirit is upon me to proclaim good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the prisoners*. What is that but good news: the Jubilee has come. God's favor has come. All the waiting is over. God is about to make all things right.

Oh, they knew this text, Isaiah 61. And they knew the kind of sermon that flowed from this wellspring. Preachers would tell of hope in a future when this promise would become real. We all need assurance that things are going to get better and that God is still in control. The world doesn't always or even often affirm this faith. Sickness that doesn't heal; oppression that doesn't lighten; life can be tough, and God's promises can seem empty. And so, we need to

hear recited again and again how good God is and to hear of the good things God will do for those whom God still tenderly cares for. People never got tired of hearing that message. It's like going to a concert. The new stuff is fine, but what you're really there for is the old stuff you know by heart. That's why you go. To sing along with friends and strangers the songs that move your heart and save your life.

When Jesus sat down after reading, they were waiting for the greatest hits to begin. For Jesus to hit the first note in the song of salvation yet to come but assured. This is the moment of meditation.

How long was the silence? How long did it last? How long would you last before squirming? We hold silence in our worship services. I've lost track of how many people have said to me, the first time I was here I was so anxious. I thought someone had forgotten their cues. Only after a couple times did I realize the silence is on purpose. We're a people who don't have much training in silence or patience or meditation.

Sometimes people also say, a little more sheepishly, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do with the silence. Do you see what they did? They fixed their eyes on Jesus. That's a pretty good place to start. In the silence, fix your eyes upon Jesus; keep them there; hold them there as long as you can until you see his eyes turn and see you.

One way to do this is to focus your mind on one word or phrase you have heard from the passage that has just been read. In the passage that Jesus read, what would that be for you?

The spirit of the Lord is upon me

Because he has anointed me

To proclaim good news to the poor

To proclaim liberty to the captives, recovering of sight to the blind

To set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

In the silence with their eyes on Jesus, what word do you think those people meditated on: *Favor*? I think it was favor. The Lord's favor has come. But Jesus' focus was a little somewhere else. His mind was on another word about to become the most important word in the whole passage and all the Gospels: *me*. The spirit of the Lord is upon *me*.

That's the Word drumming in his soul when he finally pierced the silence with words that created a new world: "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." And there was amazement.

The moment of meditation has become the moment of **contemplation**. Their eyes, fixed on Jesus, first only saw a carpenter's son; now they see something else; someone else. They see the Son of God. In Scripture, I have not just met a word of God's hope or God's promise or God's love. I encounter the living God.

When we read Scripture, the Word of God reveals God. Jesus reveals the face of God who cares for our poverty and takes to heart our future. God is not a distant, removed prime mover or overlord or first principle. Luke knows this. In Luke's Gospel, God is a father who desires with all his heart for the prodigal's return, a mother who searches the house for the one lost coin, a shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep to hunt for the one who is lost. A contemplative moment is any moment, if a moment is all you can receive right now, when you know yourself held close in the compassionate heart of God. Hold on to those moments. We don't get them all the time, not most of us. But in those moments, we encounter the God who is with us, the revelation in our hearing and in our hearts the God of love who wants to relieve the burdens that crush you, to warm the coldness of the world, to bring new life to all the places where the regime of darkness has gained a crooked foothold.

Today, this Scripture is fulfilled. Our hope is not for a far-off God who will eventually get back to us. But in a messiah, Emmanuel, God with us. God is here, now. God is here, and not just in church, but God is with you always. Centuries ago, John Chrysostom said we meet God in the Sacrament of in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of our brother and sister. There's a Liturgy in which we sing, read Scripture, and pray. And a liturgy of our daily existence. The very ordinary rhythms of our daily lives are charged with the grandeur of God. We meet God there, too.

I talked with a woman the other day who had gotten a haircut. No big deal. I get a haircut every month or so. But this haircut was a big deal. She had to find "her person" who could cut her kind of hair. She had to arrange work schedule and childcare schedule to carve out 2 hours for this haircut. I'm sure she had to save some money for such a thing. It was a decision to cut off many inches of hair and finally submit to the work of reenergizing what years of parenting and stress and neglect had done to her hair. She said, "This was a really big deal to me. I left a lot more on the floor than just clumps of hair. And my person was more than just a haircutter. It was like . . . I'm a little embarrassed to say it like this... It was like it was a sacred moment and I just needed someone to be there for me a while who I could trust to honor the moment."

Her story was a good reminder to me that God is in the ordinariness of our lives. Today, this Scripture is fulfilled. The Word of God reveals God here, now, amongst us. The word leads us to God. This encounter is the moment of **contemplation**. Then the Word leads us to other people.

This is our **response**. Jesus teaches them that in the fulfilling of the Word, God's favor will not just be for them but for strangers, aliens, even enemies and if they pay attention to Scripture, it's always been like that. They, shall we say, didn't care for that very much and try to throw him off a cliff. They weren't ready to hear that. And so, they weren't ready for Jesus. And so, he passed on to go to another place and to another people who were ready to receive and follow him.

When we discover God is a God of compassionate love, we overcome the temptation to contain this God within our sphere of personal need and pain and prejudices and biases and grudges. God's word takes us by the hand to go out of ourselves and encounter our brothers and sisters

with the power of God's liberating love. This is what Jesus shows in the synagogue. He has been sent to the poor--all of us in all kinds of ways—to set them free. The Word that became flesh wishes to be enfleshed in us, in our care for one another and those whom we learn to love only because God loved them first. What else can we do with this unruly, reckless love of God present and alive right here in front of us? He's going on. Now it's only a question of whether he goes with or without us.

May you be renewed in the power of God's Word; may your reading be slow. May your eyes be fixed on Jesus. May your contemplation delight in the presence of the living God. May the Spirit be upon you in your response to follow Jesus and imitate him as he goes to recreate the world.

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