

SERMON: Scripture Fulfilled

TEXT: Luke 4:14-21

One of my classmates in seminary was a young man named John. I was acquainted with John, but I didn't know him well. Other friends, though, would occasionally express their concerns about John. They were convinced that he didn't really want to be a minister. His dad was a minister, and he thought he was supposed to be. But he didn't talk of being called by God. Whenever a friend tried to broach the subject with him, he changed the subject. He didn't want to have to confront his dad – or himself. He seemed convinced that the situation was unchangeable. Apparently, he did quite a bit of drinking.

But I also understand that John was a really good cook, and it was obvious to others that he enjoyed it. Some of his friends tried to encourage him to pursue becoming a professional chef. Again, he changed the subject; for some reason he believed he didn't have that choice.

He completed seminary and received a call to serve a church as a solo pastor. The next time I heard anything about him, there were rumors that he came to church intoxicated, and sometimes failing to show up at all on Sunday morning. A few years ago, there was a notice in the school news magazine that he had died.

He was not even 50 years old.

Every time I think about him, I feel sad. Sad for him, that he never really found or followed his calling. He didn't ever embrace his true self; he didn't live an authentic life. Though you might say that he achieved a title and held a position in a noble profession, there was no purpose in it for him. It didn't belong to him. It wasn't fulfilling for him. He was only going through the motions.

Some would say this was an existential crisis that was never resolved. John never figured out who he was, never became who he was meant to be. Don't we all have at least one moment in our lives of identity crisis? When we wonder who we are, who we're supposed to be, if we've followed the path that was meant for us?

There are those who can say that they knew from a very young age what they wanted to be, they followed that path and never strayed from it. Our teenage years are sort of our built-in identity crisis, when we try on different personalities and different moods like we're trying on clothes. Then you graduate high school, and everybody wants to tell you that every path starts with college. Somewhere in here you have to "find yourself." If you don't do it when you're young, you wait

until it becomes a mid-life crisis, or the crisis that comes when a spouse dies young, you get divorced, or you lose your job and you have to start all over again.

Who am I? Who do I want to be? Who does God want me to be? What is my purpose? These are questions that can thrill us or pull the rug out from under us. Or both.

From the Gospel of Luke, we heard the story of Jesus teaching in his home synagogue in Nazareth. This audience of hometown folk were well acquainted with Jesus. They'd seen him grow up the son of a carpenter, and while they may have sensed something different about him, he was one of their own. Just a hometown boy.

But Jesus threw them a bit of a curveball when he read the passage from Isaiah describing the Servant of the Lord and claimed to be the fulfillment of this long-awaited figure. I imagine many eyebrows raised and mouths dropped open as he applied these words to himself: *“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." Essentially, this carpenter's son was telling his family, friends, and neighbors, that he was the Messiah.

One commentary on this passage from Isaiah notes that this prophesied Servant of the Lord was an important figure in Isaiah. There are actually four Servant Songs in Isaiah, none of which are clear about who this is or whether it is an individual or a community. A group of Biblical scholars "concluded... that the Servant was set forth as a model for both the individual and the community that in faith and obedience accepted the calling to be agents of God's reign of compassionate righteousness." (Paul D. Hanson, Interpretation: Isaiah 40-66, John Knox Press, copyright 1995)

With the words of Isaiah, Jesus re-introduces himself to his hometown crowd. "This is me, and this is my mission; this is my identity and my purpose." *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* Today, the word has become flesh.

Another scholar pointed out that this moment where Jesus claims to be the Servant of the Lord, is "a keynote to the entire ministry of Jesus." Others refer to it as the "center of the gospel," and the "mission statement" of the Messiah.

I have always believed that the greatest commandments as defined by Jesus are the center of the gospel – to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This passage, though, doesn't take away from that mission, it simply gives it greater focus and clarity about *how* we are to love God and *who* our neighbor is. We love the Lord our God by bringing good news *to the poor*, by proclaiming release *to the captives*, by recovering sight *to the blind*, and by letting *the oppressed* go free.

Jesus said this would *fulfill* scripture. Remember, he also used the word “fulfill” when he talked about the law: I came not to abolish the law, but to *fulfill* it. Let's think about what this means, to fulfill the law or to fulfill scripture. To embody the words. To show what the law looks like with a mind and a heart. To become the image that illustrates the dictionary definition. To put flesh and bone on the word, hands and feet. To bring it to life so that we can see it, hear it, smell it, taste it, touch it. To make the words step off the page and become real, three-dimensional, words that can meet us face to face, look into our eyes, whisper in our ears, touch our souls.

Jesus is good news to the poor and release to the captives. Jesus embodies sight for the blind and freedom for the oppressed.

Just a moment ago I quoted a commentary regarding the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah and the possibility that the figure could be an individual *or* a community. Clearly, Jesus is the individual. But we all know that Jesus passed on his calling to his disciples and the church.

Our church is facing an identity crisis, as are many other churches today. We are looking to the future, wondering what our identity will be. But we need to remember that it never changes. The question, “Who are we?” will – or should – always be answered, “We are servants of the Lord and representatives of Jesus.” The question, “What is our mission?” will – or should – always be answered, “Our mission is to fulfill scripture and to demonstrate the love and justice of Jesus.” The question of “how” is the one we each need to answer for ourselves.

It won't be easy and it won't be painless. It certainly was not painless for Christ.

Let me leave you with these 16th century words from St. Teresa of Avila:

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours; no hands but yours; no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out

on the world. Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people.”

May we strive to be the body of Christ in the world, to the glory of God!

AMEN.