

*“Declaration, Promise, and Invitation.”*

While looking at today’s gospel reading, a word grabbed my attention, and it was the word “today.”

Because when Jesus has finished reading that passage from Isaiah, and sits down to preach, he doesn’t then say, “The Scripture *has been* fulfilled in your hearing,” or “The Scripture *will be* fulfilled in your hearing,” but rather, “*Today*, the Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today.

What in the world did Jesus mean by that? Because, and by all appearances, on that day in northern Palestine, it probably would not have seemed to anyone in attendance that the things that Isaiah had proclaimed had come about.

Perhaps it’s simply that Jesus is announcing that, in his very person, Isaiah’s message to share God’s word of liberty and grace and healing with all — and especially with those who are most vulnerable and in need — is made manifest.

Or, maybe his brief sermon was about himself, the living Word of God who had come to dwell with us (John), to be God-

with-us (Matthew), to be a living and breathing fulfillment of God's promise to rescue and redeem all, especially those standing in the shadows and on the margins (Isaiah and Luke).

Or, maybe, the word "today" isn't a static term, but rather is far more dynamic, as in "Today is just the beginning."

And as it turns out, the tense of Jesus' declaration that "the Scripture has been fulfilled" isn't in the once and done present tense, or in the singular past tense, but rather it's in 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."

Which strikes me as kind of an important word for us today. Because by all outward appearances, Isaiah's promises have not been particularly or obviously fulfilled in our world right now either.

But the perfect tense of the language of Jesus, pushes us to see his words simultaneously as *declaration* — that is, in Jesus, God acts on behalf of those in need — as *promise* — that is, God will continue to take the side of the vulnerable — and as *invitation*

— that is, we are called to this same work of embodying, manifesting, and fulfilling God’s declaration and promise.

Declaration, promise, and invitation, all at the same time.

Truthfully, I think I’m more comfortable with the declaration and the promise, than I am with the invitation. So perhaps, and understandably, the opportunity, and especially the challenge that I hear in our gospel reading is to be more explicitly invitational. As in “You are invited to be part of the fulfillment of God’s promises. Today. Tomorrow. And the next day.”

Admittedly, that invitation can be daunting, leading us to a variety of self-doubting questions: “Me, us, really? Have you been paying attention? All of those problems seem so big!”

But the invitation can also be empowering: “Me, us, really? We can make a difference? You mean the small things we do matter? That God is at work in our lives and relationships for the sake of the world? Cool!”

Well, one source I like to turn to for ideas and insights on our gospel reading, referred me to Howard Thurman’s wonderfully challenging and equally empowering poem “The Work of Christmas.” And though we are a month beyond our celebration of

Jesus' birth, the 3rd Sunday after the Epiphany seems like just the right time to share it with you. So, here it is:

“The Work of Christmas”

by Howard Thurman

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.

So, in the end, Jesus' shortest sermon on record, also turns out to be his most challenging. But if we dare to accept his invitation, I believe we will find the work before us to be satisfying, fulfilling, and even life-giving. And that's the way it should be. Amen.