

## The Importance Of "Today"

Jesus' quote from Isaiah (Luke 4:18-19) contains a kind of good news and bad news for us. He is talking about social and economic justice for the poor and oppressed. The good news: You can start now. You can start **today**. The bad news: You'll never finish. A commitment to justice for all people -- in fact, for all of creation -- is a never-ending struggle.

**Today** is an important word for Luke. It occurs 12 times in Luke and only 9 times in the other three gospels combined. It occurs in such familiar passages as: "**Today** in the town of David a Savior has been born to you." "**Today** you will be with me in paradise." And twice in the Zacchaeus story: "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay in your house **today**." And, "**Today**, salvation has come to this house." And in our text: "**Today** this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

For Luke **today** is a moment of radical change.

The shepherds come and see the savior born in Bethlehem. They return rejoicing and praising God. They had been changed.

After Jesus' visit with Zacchaeus, he is changed. He says: "Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

We can suppose that the eternal life of the thief on the cross was radically changed by Jesus' words. He is promised eternity in paradise.

In our Gospel Lesson, there is a change in the people who heard Jesus. At first they are proud of their hometown boy. They boast to one another about knowing his parents. But the more Jesus talked about God's grace -- even for non-Jews, another reaction came forth from the people. Luke tells us, "All the people in the synagogue were filled with rage." They try to kill Jesus by throwing him over a cliff.

**Today** is a time of change brought about through an encounter with Jesus. The change may involve attitude -- rejoicing and praising God; or, wanting to kill Jesus. The change may involve financial priorities -- giving rather than getting. The change may involve finding comfort and hope in the midst of despair and death.

However, we often avoid the changes of **today**. Some try to continue to live the past. "Remember the good, old days." They may remember all the good times way back when. They may remember and talk about all the things they used to do. What are they doing to make **today** just as glorious?

Or they may look back at the rotten past and blame all their troubles on their hated history. What are they doing **today** to change that past?

History is important. We constantly need to look back and learn from our mistakes and successes. But we can't live in the past. We live **today**. It has been suggested that the greatest threats to congregations **today** are past successes that no longer work well in the present. (We tend to drop past failures, but what worked for us back then, we may hold onto past its usefulness.) At the same time, I heard a speaker state that congregations that forget their past and traditions are like people with amnesia or Alzheimers -- they don't know who they are.

On the other hand, we can also avoid changes of **today** by dreaming of the ideal tomorrow. Someday the prisons will be empty. Someday the oppressed will be set free. Someday poverty will be ended. Someday all people will have heard the gospel. God will do all that someday -- so we don't have to do anything **today** to help the oppressed out of their plights. Someday I'll lose weight. Someday I'll quit smoking. Someday I'll start exercising. Someday I'll take a college course. And we do nothing **today** to help make that future come true.

For Jesus' listeners, and for us, the word **today** is terrifying. On one hand, Jesus is not who they expected. "Isn't this Joseph's son?" they ask. If **today** is the day of God's great salvation, what's this Jesus doing here telling it to us? If **today** is the great day, where are all the miracles? If **today** is such an extraordinary day, why don't I see some extraordinary things happening? Jesus, the boy raised in that town by Mary and Joseph, simply spoke to the people. No flashing lights. No voices from heaven. Jesus saying a few words in the synagogue. "Immanuel" -- God with us -- is Jesus coming in a few words.

Yesterday can look glorious. Tomorrow can look so glamorous. But **today** is so ordinary. So many of us get into a routine, a rut. **Today** is just another day. Was Jesus just another home-town boy? Were his words just another teacher's words? The great, saving event of God comes in common, ordinary ways. Sometimes we may even miss them. **Today** is an extraordinary day -- God is with you **today**.

**Today** is a terrifying word because it calls you to action now. "I don't know what to do?" You might complain. "I don't want to make a decision now," you rationalize. The call of **today** shakes you out of your complacency. Just as "the Spirit of the Lord" was upon Jesus, so that same Spirit is upon each of you. You will make some wrong decisions, God promises to forgive those -- and who knows how the Spirit will use your mistakes! You will make some right decisions and you know that the Spirit will use those. You will become a better person, a better believer, and this world will be a better place for some people.

We are to be radical community on earth. We are called and empowered to work for the release of people who are bound -- the rehabilitation of prisoners, the freeing of people wrapped in their shells of self-doubt and self-pity.

We are called and empowered to work on behalf of the poor and oppressed. How can we help the poor in our county? How can we help the elderly? How can we help single parents? What about the oppressed around the world? Those in Central America? Those in Namibia? Those in the new nations that used to be part of the Soviet Union?

"Those are idealistic and impossible dreams," you can say. I would agree with you. But that is why that word **today** becomes so frightening. Jesus is saying that the impossible is happening **today**. The good news is: You can start now. You can be part of those miracles **today**. The bad news is: You'll never finish. If you answer the call to start -- it is a lifetime commitment. There will be great, wonderful moments along the way, but there will always be more that needs to be done.

Brian Stoffregen  
Faith Lutheran Church, 1000 D St., Marysville, CA 95901  
e-mail: [b.stoffregen@worldnet.att.net](mailto:b.stoffregen@worldnet.att.net)