

Isaiah 61:1-6  
1 Corinthians 12:12-21,26-27  
St. Luke 4:14-21

Luke 4:14-21

<sup>14</sup>Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. <sup>15</sup>He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

<sup>16</sup>When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup>and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

<sup>18</sup> “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,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

<sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Martin Luther is said to have posed a question for people to ask themselves to test the sincerity of their own Christianity. He asked, “What if it were all true, all that we believe about God, and Jesus, and creation, and the church...except this: there is nothing after this life. When you die, you die. There will be no promise of heaven and no threat of hell. All your good deeds will go unrewarded. All your sins will go unpunished. Would you still be a Christian? Is it enough to have a relationship with God today? Or is our religion, primarily, a safeguard for the future?”

It seems almost blasphemous to even ask the question. We spend so much of our Christianity on the future. People say, “I want to be a Christian so I can go to heaven when I die.” Indeed that is a wonderful promise. But, during his ministry, Jesus spent a good deal more time talking about how we should live today than he spent describing the joys of the life to come.

People’s priorities are often different from those of Jesus. A good deal that bears the label “Christianity” is about the future. Religious discussions are most energetic when the topic is who is going to heaven and who is not. When the conversation turns to how we can live as disciples *today* – then things tend to get more abstract.

The favorite religious questions are: Who will be punished? Who will be rewarded? and How can we predict the future? That “How can we predict the future?” one accounts for a very heavy portion of our religious speculation. Many books are written about business ethics, spiritual well being, and how to address world hunger – important issues about how we should live today. Want to guess how well those books sell compared to the “Left Behind” series, which purports to be a description of the “last days” in the “near future”?

Some thought the interest in predicting the end of time was tied to the second millennium – but that has come and gone and the interest is still there. It always has been. A Christian

named Hippolytus of Rome, around the year 200 A.D., read the measurements of Noah's ark in the Book of Genesis, made some computations and announced the world would end in the year 500. The end of the first thousand years got everybody's attention just like the end of the second thousand that we experienced seven years ago. Church historians tell of the thousands of baptisms that happened on the last day of December in the year 999. They didn't want to still be pagans when the Lord showed up, on the other hand they didn't want to waste any more energy than necessary on being Christian. We may think of that as the delusions of primitive people, but humanity has been at it ever since.

In the 1840s William Miller set an exact date for Jesus' return. As a matter of fact, he set the exact date four different times. His followers would dress in white robes and wait on a hillside. Some of them founded the Seventh Day Adventists who still refer to those times as "The Great Disappointment".

Back in the nineties a white buffalo was calved in Janesville, Wisconsin and widely hailed as a prediction of the end. I don't mind that so much, but that's because I've never had a buffalo ring my doorbell and give me a pamphlet. Last I heard he had grown up and turned brown and nobody visited anymore.

We're a few years into the third millenium but the calendar is a human invention. Today is given to us by God.

This morning's Gospel lesson records that Jesus went into a synagogue and was given a scroll. He read from the Book of Isaiah about the way things should be. About the work of God being done among all people. "...good news to the poor,...release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; ...the broken victims go free, ...the year of the Lord's favor." He read about all the promises that religious people are used to hearing.

Then he sat down and preached his sermon. "'Today,' he said 'In your hearing this text has come true.'" His sermon was shorter than his scripture reading...but it said everything of importance that has been said in any Christian sermon since. The Christ has come. The Kingdom of God is here. You can stop waiting. Things are different now. How things will be is no longer a matter of speculation. God has come in the person of Jesus Christ and we are talking about how things *are*.

Jesus' message was so startling because religious people then were like religious people now. Religious people made bold predictions about the future and didn't ask too much of the world they lived in at the moment. And now Jesus said time had run out on predictions. The wonderful things that Isaiah had promised so many years before were not the stuff of the future. These things were a description of life today.

When we take our religion out of the tranquility of the future and bring it into the jarring closeness of the very day we are living it is bound to be upsetting. Remember how upsetting Luther's question was? What if there was no punishment and no reward? What if your relationship with God was all about today? That is an upsetting question.

It gives us an idea of how Jesus' listeners responded to him. Jesus said these cherished promises of Isaiah are not about the future. These words of Isaiah are about how you live today.

The purpose of Christianity is not to predict the future. Jesus is alive with us today.

We no longer wish that this could be one world. We no longer hope for the time when we can be brothers and sisters. We can start living like it. "Today this text has come true."

When our relationship with God is based on something that will happen in the future, we have given up what God has done. He has come into our lives.

It is not the case that the Church only speaks in terms of speculation and potential. When the Church is out of touch with our lives today it is out of touch with the Gospel. And that is serious.

This world has troubles and sin. If we think we can't be God's children unless we are free of troubles and sin then we won't be part of God's Kingdom. God came into this world with all its hardship and misery and, finally, death. He came into this world and made it his.

This is reality. Jesus Christ made this world his home. He made our lives part of his plan. He said, "Today this text has come true." Religion that is based on predictions is not what Jesus has in mind. It is not for us to sit around wondering when God is going to do something. It is for us to recognize the reality of what God has already done. And it is for us to respond to what he has done with our own lives.

God continues to bring his kingdom into this world everyday of our lives. The same Christ who made the text come true still lives in the world - today.

He inspires you to give your life to something real, something bigger than yourself. Jesus shows you that reality is how much you have to offer instead of how much you have to gain. God's truest words are spoken in praise rather than criticism. You can order your life by God's wisdom. You can be generous and honest and the world will be a better place because you are living in it. And all of this starts today.

Your religion is more than making predictions. Your relationship with God is not only a promise for the future.

Don't save your relationship with God for the future. Jesus' has come into your life today.

Jesus' message for you begins with the word "today". He is with you in today's decisions, today's commitments, today's hopes. God fills your life with his grace today.