

St James United Church



Message for January 19, 2025 Second Sunday after Epiphany

“Fulfilled Today” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; Luke 4:14-21; and “Building the Neighborhood” by Steve Garnaas-Homes

As I shared in our Learning Together time, I hope that most of you had a chance to watch the worship service last week. but I realize not everyone will have, so let me summarize my reflection. My main point was that Jesus choosing to be baptized was an act of solidarity, a decision to embrace the fullness of our humanity which includes a need to seek repentance. If that’s the case, then not only are we with him as he accepts that part of us, but we’re with him as he is affirmed as God's beloved child, and so God affirms the same of us. This idea is not new. It was first suggested by theologians like Athanasius in the early centuries of the church. Despite that pedigree, this affirmation of our identity is not widely embraced, too many of us feeling lesser than we are, judged by others and internalising that judgement. We are left to feel like God is distant from us when in reality God is always with us, within us, in love and with grace.

We wrestle with accepting God's abiding love, but in solidarity with us, Jesus did that too in the portion of the story preceding what we just heard, when in the wilderness he tried to make sense of God’s claim on him and how to embody it in his life. But as we heard he must have come to terms with it, embraced his beloved identity, embraced the same of all of us. The recognition of that informed what came next when he returned home to begin a ministry summed up in the part of Isaiah he read and then simply declared: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

I find something exceptional in this declaration, especially the word today - Isaiah’s words are fulfilled today, and so good news brought to the poor today, captives released today, sight restored today, the oppressed set free today, the year of God’s favour proclaimed today, again and again a message of healing and restoration, of liberation and justice experienced today.

And though his words were first directed to the people in synagogue in Nazareth, I believe those words are also being said to us today, just like when God affirmed Jesus as their beloved child and said the same to us. It’s like this because sharing a bible reading is an act of anamnesis, a fancy Greek word meaning that in remembering, the event that’s recalled in the past is present, that we’re there. Our Jewish siblings say this about the giving of Torah at Sinai, that not only the ancient Israelites were present but in that moment all their descendants were too. Likewise of the Passover, in remembering their liberation, they’re being liberated again. And it’s the same for us.

I wonder if we can believe that is possible, that God’s promises can be fulfilled today. We often think of faith as oriented to the future. God is at work in the world, but the outcome is long from now. Or maybe God is at work in our lives, but the goal is heaven, so won’t be achieved until the end of our lives. Or we think in terms of the past, that maybe God was at work in Jesus, but he

left us his teachings and ascended to God, so it's up to us to make a difference in the world, in our community. But then we do that under our own steam. Or we do it only based on tradition, on what we think is supposed to be done and where it's to be done, and end up overlooking where God is fulfilling that promise of change, healing, liberation in unexpected places, God building a neighbourhood as Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests, even if we aren't aware of it. And yet even if we are doubtful, or self-directed, or waiting for a future time, God is at work just the same. Why? Because as I said – God loves us, made us in their image, breathed Spirit into us, affirmed this with Jesus at his baptism, claimed us as beloved children, claimed you as their beloved child. And so God is there, within us and between us, animating us as we seek what we need.

And so I invite you to consider Jesus' words not in general, but as personally directed to you, with a caveat that we aren't "shoulding" on ourselves as they say in AA, that is beating ourselves up for what we should do, or internalising the judgements of others. That said, I invite you to sit quietly. Ponder what aspects of the "year of God's favour" which is about return of land, freeing of debts, people returning home, what of that do you need in your life? Where do you feel indebted? What in the past needs reconciling? What needs a homecoming? Or what holds you captive? What needs to be considered from a fresh view? What good news do you need, not in some future, or stuck in the past, but today? Hear what Jesus is saying to your heart as I re-read Isaiah: 'The Spirit is upon me. They have anointed me to bring good news to the poor. They've sent me to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favour.' ...*silent reflection*... Did you hear what God wants for you? Don't dismiss it. Claim it in the centre of who you are.

Jesus' words of fulfillment are intended for you, today the beginning of a change, a setting free. Now it may take time. And it may not be what you expect, what you prayed for, or even be for you directly but for someone close which brings a release that you also need. But it's not less real as a result. And try not to assume that this change comes from outside yourself. Though I said we tend to try making change on our own, I didn't mean we should just wait for a miracle. Quite the opposite. I'd argue that the change we need has to come from within us, but not only by us. Rather the Spirit works with our gifts, the capacities already present, but perhaps don't think much of, taught to doubt ourselves.

As we heard Paul say to the Christians in Corinth, the Spirit gave them all kinds of gifts, some the gift of healing, others of prophecy, others tongues and others interpreting them. These weren't spiritual gifts that everyone received but individual gifts, used together for the whole. And the same is true for us, the Spirit gifting us so we can prayerfully be part of building our neighbourhood. But it starts with the healing, the building up that we need, again, because God is with us, loving us, has claimed each of us as a beloved child. Trust that.

And so as we come together today, I pray we do so hearing Jesus speaking not just in the past, or speaking only about a distant future, but speaking to each of us, right now. As we remember how he went to the synagogue and read from the scroll of Isaiah, he comes here, now, opens the scroll for us and affirms once more that God's promises are fulfilled, now, today, in our hearing. Thanks be to God. Amen.