

Sermon 1/23/2022

Luke 4:14-21

As I was doing my research for my sermon today, I actually learned something new. That New Song has a similarity to the ancient Jewish synagogue life on the Sabbath. It was common in Jesus's day that someone other than the Rabbi or some other religious authority would read and comment on the verse and scriptures of the day. Very similar to the New Song preaching Rota. This was a practice widely used and expected by the congregation. The preacher would take the reading out of the historical context and apply the ancient story and wisdom of the prophets to the religious, political, and ethical question of the day. Making them more alive and relevant to what was going on at the moment. I am not sure I am going to pronounce this correctly, but the people who did this were called darshanim (dar fa nim)

Jesus, filled with the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all of the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. And Jesus decides to head to his hometown to preach as he was apparently on the Rota for that day.

Nazareth was a small town in the time of Jesus with a population of around four hundred people. So, you can imagine the excitement that must have been around the fact that he was darshanim for this Sabbath.

I am sure people were excited to hear about the wisdom of the old prophets and the vision of their ancestors and the beauty of the world as God had covenanted with Moses. Or would he expound on the glorious days yet to come as promised by Isaiah. How we pray for that how we long for those glorious days. He could appeal to his Nazarian brethren with How great Isaiah was or the fragile theological hope for a better future.

So, the hometown boy has returned home as a young man to worship in his home synagogue. He has become known for the quality of his preaching. He does the assigned reading. Our sense memories can feel the congregation settle in and the collective hush of the crowd, the electric feel of anticipation for what one of their own is about to say. Then Jesus does something that some day I myself would love to do. He preaches a one sentence sermon:

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Can you feel the disappointment? The anger, the feeling cheated. You come home and all you give us is one sentence. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. "Not yesterday, not tomorrow. Today.

Diana Butler Bass in a sermon entitled The Power of Today given on Jan 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016, states the following:

Faith communities are often consumed with memories of the past and hopes for the future. Speaking of the past may take a form of maintaining buildings and structures, of teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from ancestors. Speaking of the future is often wrapped up in hopes for salvation and eternal life, desires for answered prayers, for the children to hold onto faith or "come back to church." Both past and future are important to vibrant communities; healthy and life-giving practices of honoring our ancestors and embracing a hopeful future derive from the witness of the whole biblical tradition.

But both "past" and "future" as the primary location of faith have their shadow sides. Overemphasizing the past results in

nostalgia--the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future--a disposition that is steeped in grief and fear.

Overemphasizing the future--the belief that all that matters is that which is to come--often results in thwarted hope, doubt, and anxiety.

A recent survey from Public Religion Research discovered that the majority of churchgoers in the United States express high levels of both nostalgia and anxiety. By strong majorities, religious Americans--particularly white Protestants, and without any significant difference between theological conservatives and liberals--believe that "our best days are behind us" and that the future of society is bleak. In particular, mainline congregations are caught between valorizing the good old days and a deepening sense of desolation that some promised future will never arrive. Evidently, most Protestants would rather look back with sadness than trust that a more just and beautiful future beckons. As a result, today is lost. Today is merely a stage upon which we mourn the loss of past and fear what we cannot imagine.

But "today" is a deeply dangerous spiritual reality--because today insists that we lay aside both our memories and our dreams to embrace fully the moment of now. The past romanticizes the work of our ancestors; the future scans the horizons of our

descendants and depends upon them to fix everything. But "today" places *us* in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God's desire for the world.

"Today" is the most radical thing Jesus ever said.

Jesus essentially told his friends, "Look around. See the Spirit of God at work, right here. Right now. God is *with us*. Just as I AM promised our father Moses at the burning bush, 'I will be with you.' This is the sign of God's covenant. The ever active, ever loving, ever liberating, always present God is here with us. Now."

In recent times we here at New Song are dismissed with this from the Talmud:

"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

I feel that the now in this could easily be substituted with the radical teaching of Jesus with the word, "Today"

As you can probably tell a lot of my sermon today comes from my reading of Diana Butler Bass. What she had to say resonated with me.

As a founding member of New Song, I was at the youth of my middle age when we started. Today I am at the youth of my golden years.

New Song members as a whole are not easily daunted by the task at hand. And as individuals we can check off a lot of what is asked of us in today's Gospel of bringing good news to the poor with the work that people do at the food pantries. We bring release to the captives in the work that people do with those incarcerated or being newly released from prison and trying to find their way back into society. And we have individuals that do amazing work in racial and workers justice.

We love justly, we walk humbly, and we have not abandoned the work individually.

But as a congregation have, we, become stuck in the nostalgia of our past and the fear of our future? What does New Song stand for as a whole? Does our mission, vision and goal statements of 27 years ago still hold true to the work of today? Are our growth

teams obsolete in today's world? Do we as a complete congregation represent the amazingness of us as individuals? From a bird's eye view what does the corporal world of New Song stand for today? Is a photograph of New Song that of a sunrise or a sunset?

I am good at asking the hard questions but horrible at offering any easy answers because there are no easy answers. But I believe even as I enter the youth of my golden years that I still want us as a complete congregation to step into deeply dangerous spiritual reality of "Today"

It is just not I or me but we and the us that live today's gospel. Living in God's promise is not about yesterday or is it waiting for some new prophet to get us out of the mess in the future.

The hard truth of Jesus one sentence sermon is as clear and poignant as ever.

Today this promise has been fulfilled in your hearing-what we need is here. Today.

And all of God's children say,

Amen.