

Luke 4: 14-21 ()

“Today”

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According to Forbes Magazine, at least 22 Million people have so far have watched Steve Job’s commencement speech to the graduating class of Stanford University on June 12th, 2005. On the day of commencement, his wife recalls in *Becoming Steve Jobs* that he woke up with “butterflies” in his stomach. According to her, her husband was not the greatest and most confident showman, but he rarely got nervous about anything.

The speech meant a lot to him. He himself never finished college but decided to follow his passion by taking college classes that interested him. In fact, when his birthparents gave him up for adoption, they wanted to get a promise from the adoptive couple that they would send this child to college. They did. But Steve decided differently. If you get the chance, listen to it or read it. It’s easily found on the net.

It is an awesome speech. And here is why:

First, it is short, not even 15 minutes long but packed with meaning. Interestingly a lot of powerful messages (according to TED Talks) have been delivered under just 18 minutes: JFK inspired a nation in 15 minutes and MLK shared a vision of radical equality in 17 minutes.

Secondly, the speech has a theme that resonates with just about everyone who seeks meaning in their lives and in their career. Do what you love. Follow your passion. The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking. Don’t settle! Jobs said.

Thirdly, he wraps three lessons in three stories that were personal. A message in three parts is a simple way to remember, and when you make it personal – how can you forget the message. That is what my spouse always says to me about sermons: Make them personal!

Fourthly, the content of the message. Jobs' speech emphasizes triumph over adversity. Each of three vignettes from his life involve struggle or sacrifice. We are hard-wired to empathize with one another, and stories are a vehicle through which we share our common bonds. And yes, it helps that there were happy endings to the struggle and sacrifice because it is the triumph that gives people hope and courage to embrace this journey we call life.

If you have a moment, listen to the speech. It is a finely crafted address that connects with the audience on an emotional and inspirational level. It was written from the heart. We preachers (or anyone ever having to give a speech) can learn a great deal from it if we only find the time to detach ourselves from our Apple products.

The best, most memorable speeches are, let's repeat: short, themed, hope giving, and from the heart. In that sense, the speech/sermon by Jesus gave does not stand far behind. What are we stepping into?

People were really excited to see and hear Jesus. One of their own is coming home. According to the gospel of Luke, Jesus had just been baptized by John, and then went on a wilderness retreat – whisked away by the Holy Spirit to spend 40 days of serious abstinence, prayer, and reflection. Upon his return, Jesus had begun preaching and teaching, already establishing the reputation of a charismatic itinerant preacher. So, the people of Nazareth were excited and expectant. What will he say? What will his message be to us?

Jesus' return to his home town might have been the most exciting event in years. Nazareth was not known as a religious nor cultural destination. It was as bad as a countryside can get. So, people were hungry for some excitement and news.

Jesus was the guest Rabbi for the weekly Shabbat service. And as it was custom, he would read the scripture, and then offer his interpretation of what was read, and maybe do a Q and A.

The passage Jesus chose was well-known to his listeners. These familiar words from Isaiah had accompanied the people for hundreds of years. These words were their story, his story. The words once again came alive as Jesus read them:

*God's Spirit is on me;
he's chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
To announce, "This is God's year to act!"*

When the reading was done, Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it to the assistant, and sat down, for that was the custom in those days. And then they waited for his reflection. And this was his sermon. He said: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

That was it. Well, he kept to one of the sermon/speech writing criteria: it sure was short. He would have flunked any seminary preaching course. Short was the only mark he hit, but he seemed to miss the others: the theme, the hope, and the heart.

Apparently Jesus thought that his message was clear enough. Next week we shall learn just what the congregation in Nazareth thought of that sermon. But for now, suffice it to say that even as we read this same passage all these millennia later – the sermon is the same. "Today - this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

And what does this Scripture say? Good news for the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed. There is the personal story theme. They remembered in their hearts what the exile under Babylon was like and how they had felt and what they had lost. And under the Romans, times weren't that much better. They connected to what it meant to be poor and oppressed, and not having any real options. Jesus did not have to spell that out.

The hope was that they did not have to wait for the Jubilee years to come around. It was the custom that every 7th and 50th year in Israelite culture, no business could be done as usual. During those years, slaves must be given their freedom...families can return to lands lost in litigation...farmland and field get a Sabbath of rest due to no planting or harvesting; debts are...cancelled, there's to be a moratorium on marketing and the commoditizing of life.' Liberation, restoration, health restored, jails unlocked, land returned: a whole array of social justice revolutions were to take place in the years of the Jubilee.

This Scripture, this “whole array of social justice revolutions” is Jesus’ agenda, an outline of his ministry, the foundation of his gospel. It is his vision for anyone who wishes to follow him. It is all about the connection to the poor, the marginalized, the battered, and the beaten. That single relationship is the essence of Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus’ first sermon to his fellow Jews is anything but social justice issues: he is not talking about faith and faithfulness or how to get closer to God; he is not talking about how to keep the commandments and all the rules and regulations. He talks about nothing we might expect from a religious leader. It's all about how society, Jesus’ society at the time, is to be changed--how it is to be a kinder, gentler, and more just society.

If I were to ask you why Jesus came to this earth, how would you answer? Maybe some of you would reply, “He came to save us.” Or, “He came to die for our sins.” Or, “He leads me to a closer relationship with God.” Or, “He came to show us God loved us.” Or, “He came to fulfill what was said about Him in the Old Testament.”

All of these answers are somewhat abstract and future oriented. Jesus (and the one who wrote down the gospel of Luke) is not interested in doing all this good work in the future, but now is the time. Today is the day. Every moment should be a Jubilee year. Transformation of this world and these lives is needed now, not in the future. I think that is why Jesus did not need to say any more. He said it all.

This Scripture has great implications for us: If we want to be Jesus’ followers, if we truly want to carry his name, if he is part of us and our identity, then will we not just be drawn to his message, but will have to find ways to integrate this message into our daily lives. Otherwise we are fooling ourselves about what the church is all about and what it means to be called a Christian.

And so the question for us is this: Is the Spirit of the Lord upon us – this congregation – this church family? Because if it is, no matter how inadequate we might feel at times, we – you and I - are the hands, feet, heart, eyes, ears, brains, and lungs of Jesus.

And because of that, because we are the Body of Christ, Jesus calls us to live out the Good News and to strategize the best way to get that pivotal message out to the most people.

He calls us to fill the bowls of the hungry and to walk for the sick.

He calls us to proclaim our solidarity with the ones that society has left on the sidelines and to listen for the people crying into the bleak darkness of their lives.

He calls us to do all of these things - because the spirit of the Lord is upon us too.

Jesus says that the Scripture is fulfilled **today** which means that we are not called to live in the past and remember the good old days and only sing the good old hymns and be imprisoned by the way things used to be. And we are not called to live in the future either, dreaming of an ideal tomorrow. Someday there will be peace. Someday the world will be a better place. Someday our church will have the money and the volunteers to do everything we ought to be doing. Our challenge for today is to find our roles, find our calling, find what we are created for, and do it, now.

I admit, this message is challenging and terrifying because it calls us to action, radical, counter-cultural action today. We'd rather live a faith that keeps us close to God where we find our personal spiritual connection but stay out of this transformative work.

But deep down we know that this is not what church is all about, or faith for that matter. We are here to fulfill the Scripture. We are here to love and care deeply for the poor, the lost, the battered, the bruised, the lonely, the burdened, the ill.

This is our story, our Scripture, our calling, and we are called work intentionally together to live that story, fulfill that Scripture, and pursue the call that Jesus has issued because today is God's year to act!

Amen.