

February 3, Epiphany 4C (Luke 4:21–30)

There's a lot of urgency in that single word *today*.

Sunday's Coming Premium

January 2, 2019

What a day! Jesus has returned home to Nazareth and made his way to the synagogue, as is his custom. The hometown boy who's done well has come home to preach, and the synagogue is no doubt packed—Luke says his fame has spread throughout the countryside. People love a winner, and they love a spectacle. This crowd knows Jesus and he knows them, so they turn out to hear him preach—this favorite son, back in the synagogue, back to the friendly and familiar, back to a day that used to be. They expect to experience exactly what they have experienced in the past; they are backing into the future with their eyes on what's behind. They crowd into the synagogue to relive the glorious days of what used to be.

Luke makes the preliminaries brief and hurries us into the synagogue. Once inside, with worship under way, Jesus stands up to read. As he ascends the steps, the attendant draws aside the silk curtain containing the sacred manuscripts and hands him the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

Whether the Isaiah scroll was handed to Jesus by prearrangement or by providence we do not know. The synagogue had no official readers; any competent male member could read one of the lessons. This is the only place in the Bible where Jesus is portrayed as reading. What a sight it must have been: the Word reading the word.

With the scroll in his hand, Jesus purposely and meticulously finds this passage: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me for 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, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

When Jesus is done reading, he follows established custom and sits down to preach. With the eyes of the hometown crowd fixed on him, the first word out of his mouth is “Today.” Today the hopes contained in this passage are realized in your hearing. Today he has come to release and restore, to reach and redeem. He is the anointed herald who has come to mediate God's final deliverance. Jesus takes this oft-repeated promise from Isaiah and brings it into nowness.

Sometimes it is dangerous to do things now. If Jesus said someday, tomorrow, after a while, by and by, or in the not-too-distant future, he could have pacified the people in their disappointment about where and to whom he has been sent to minister. But when he says today—this is my mission and my ministry—he draws a line in the sand and provokes a response.

Martin Luther King Jr. knew the dangers inherent in doing things today. King penned his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* after southern white moderates criticized his nonviolent protests as “unwise and untimely.” “Change,” King was told, “must come slowly.” They urged him to stop the sit-ins and marches for a while and give things time to settle down. They saw negotiation with the white power structure as the more reasonable path and advised King to be more patient in his pursuit of civil rights for all Americans.

King, determined to live in nowness, explains to his sympathetic critics that he has never engaged in a direct-action movement that was “well-timed.” He notes that the word *wait* rings in the ear of the disenfranchised with

piercing familiarity. Refusing to abide by a more cautious approach, King says that waiting is too much of a burden for oppressed people to continue to bear. Justice too long delayed is justice denied. King, who lived in the moment, sensing that time was not on his side, knew from experience that *wait* almost always meant *never*. There has always been something unsettling about those who choose to act today.

The today in Luke 4 of which Jesus speaks is no mere today. This today has the ring of the eschaton about it, for in this today one senses what Thomas Long describes as “God’s good future hurtling toward us, bringing the finished work of God to an unfinished world.” This today signals that the age of God’s reign is here, that the time when God’s redemptive purposes comes to fruition has arrived. This word in its nowness says no to our tendency to get caught up in the paralysis of analysis. It forces us to face the immediacy of God’s promises. If we miss the urgency of today, we are destined to join the ranks of the unready, trying to get the unprepared to do the unnecessary. Today, says Jesus, this scripture is realized in your hearing.

Not only has the hometown crowd failed to recognize where and among whom Jesus’ ministry will take place, they are also disappointed with his announcement that it will begin right now. With his insistence on today, he forces the hand of the people who thought they knew him so well. They simply cannot bring themselves to accept the immediacy of the universal availability of the good news. Thus their desire to put a stop to him before he begins. People often respond in surprising ways when they sense that you are serious about what you plan to do and when you plan to do it. So, they drive him out of town, lead him to the brow of the hill with the intention of hurling him off the cliff. Their attempt to kill him is but a precursor to what awaits him on Calvary. It is the only thing in this story that awaits another day.