

"These Are Better Days"

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

I'm usually a very patient person, but even my patience has its limits; and those limits were tested shortly after we moved to Stratford and ordered a new bedroom set from a nationwide furniture chain. The salesperson promised us that our new furniture would be delivered on a specific date, and that the delivery people would set it up and remove the packaging from our home. Everything seemed great – until the promised delivery day arrived, and there was no sign of our furniture. Trying to give them the benefit of the doubt, I called their customer service line; the person at the other end apologized for the missed delivery and promised that it would be delivered "tomorrow." Well, tomorrow came and went, and still no furniture. Still seeking to be a kind a patient person, I phoned them again; this time, the person had difficulty locating our order, and then told us that it was coming from a distribution center far from Stratford and would arrive "tomorrow." Tomorrow came – and you can probably guess what wasn't at our house! So, I called again, and was once again promised delivery "tomorrow." At this point, my patience came to an end; and in a very forceful voice I responded, "today is the tomorrow you promised yesterday – and I'm tired of waiting for 'tomorrow' to come!"

Waiting is a part of everyone's life, and there are times when delays are unavoidable. But there are also times when our patience wears thin after promises of "tomorrow" go continually unfulfilled, or when we have no idea how long we may have to wait. For the people of Israel, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises had become a part of their national identity; but even though God's prophets had continually assured them that God would fulfill all that God had promised, over time they began to grow impatient and wonder when – or if – God would indeed accomplish all that they had heard over the generations. They had heard that "*the days are surely coming, says the LORD*" – but when would that day arrive?

Even though the people of Israel may have been wondering when "tomorrow" would come, they still gathered in their synagogues on the Sabbath to hear the Word of God proclaimed in Hebrew Scripture – the Torah, the Writings, and the Prophets. It was into this worship setting that Jesus entered when he returned to his hometown of Nazareth after his forty-day ordeal of temptation and "*went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.*" (Luke 4:16). Here we see the customs and habits that guided Jesus' life: "*He is one who regularly participates in the religious life of his community; he is a reader who contributes to the reading of Scripture in worship, and he is a teacher.*" (Ruth Anne Reese).

The synagogue in Jesus' time had no official readers; any competent male reader could read one of the lessons. As the "favorite son" who has returned to his hometown synagogue, 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.*" (Cleophus J. LaRue). Since there was no lectionary or assigned readings, Jesus was free to choose a reading from the scroll of the prophets; his choice is a reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah:

- "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor ..." – Isaiah 61:1-2.

The identity of this Servant of whom the prophet speaks "*is inextricably tied up with commitment to God's will, a commitment to be present as an agent of God's mercy to the broken and the oppressed and as one announcing that after years of mourning the time had arrived in which God will restore the conditions of justice and peace that characterize God's reign.*" (Paul D. Hanson).

Following the practice of synagogue worship, when Jesus is finished reading “*he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.*” (4:20). Sitting down was an important action, because it signaled to the synagogue crowd that Jesus was now taking on his role as a teacher (as he did at the Sermon on the Mount: “*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.*” – Matthew 5:1). The room must have been filled with great anticipation; not only was Jesus the hometown boy who had returned to teach but having been “*filled with the power of the Spirit, [he] returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*” (4:14-15). As Jesus’ birth had been characterized by Spirit and power (“*The angel said to [Mary], ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.’*” – 1:35), so also now the Spirit empowers Jesus at the beginning of his ministry.

Manifestations of the power of the Lord will also be evident in Jesus’ works throughout Luke’s Gospel:

- “They were all amazed and kept saying to one another, ‘What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and they come out!’” – 4:36.
- “One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby (they had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem); and the power of the Lord was with him to heal.” – 5:17.
- “And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.” – 6:19.

Whatever the synagogue congregation at Nazareth had been anticipating, they probably didn’t expect to hear what Jesus announced: “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*” (4:21). Jesus announces that the centuries of waiting on God’s blessing have ended; the words of the prophet that spoke of an anointed by the Spirit, the work of the prophet, and dramatic signs of God’s redemption had now been accomplished in their presence. It is significant that the first public word Jesus speaks as an adult is “today.” The age of God’s reign is here; the time when God’s promises are fulfilled and God’s purpose comes to fruition has arrived. The people of God no longer must wait for tomorrow, because “tomorrow” has become “today.”

- “This today signals that the age of God’s reign is here, that the time when God’s redemptive purposes come to fruition have 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... Today, Jesus says, this scripture is realized in your hearing.” – LaRue.

Because tomorrow has become today in the presence of Jesus, there will be changes in the conditions of those who have waited and hoped. In the chapters that follow in Luke, Jesus will travel from town to town, “*and wherever he goes he will teach and heal living out the good news so that people can see the salvation that God offers.*” (Reese). But some people will have difficulty accepting the reality that “today” has finally arrived, or that the promises they had anticipated when “tomorrow” comes have not been fulfilled according to their expectations. Many people had come to believe that the Messiah that would come whenever “tomorrow” arrived would be a mighty warrior-king who would defeat the enemies of God’s people and restore Israel to its rightful place among the nations. Even his closest disciples asked Jesus in their last moments with him before his ascension “*Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?*” (Acts 1:6). They had expected that when the Messiah came, that would be a day when they would be blessed; but Jesus’ declaration that God’s promises had been fulfilled “today” announces that the good news would first come to the poor, the prisoner, and the oppressed. The fulfillment of God’s promises for “tomorrow” had come “today” – but not the way the people had expected.

When we have waited so long for tomorrow to come, it may catch us off-guard when today finally arrives. We may have spent our time of waiting speculating on what will happen when it is over and dreaming of what will happen when our name is called, or our number is up, or when what has been promised finally arrives. We may be filled with hope and expectation – but their fulfillment may not necessarily live up to what we have anticipated. When Jesus announces that *“today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,”* he is proclaiming that God’s promises have been fulfilled and that God’s Will is being accomplished; and as God proclaimed through the same prophet, *“my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”* (Isaiah 55:8-9). Jesus’ declaration that today is the day of God’s fulfillment of God’s promises is good news for us, and a call for us to look to God and not ourselves as the true source of blessing from the one who knows our needs better than us:

- “Unless human beings cast aside their pride and smug confidence in their rationalizing defense of their position, unless they assume a posture of awe before the Creator of the universe, they will not get the point that opens up to them the covenant of peace, the point that it is all free for those who confess the inadequacy of their own solutions and therefore desire God’s thoughts and God’s ways.” – Hanson.

Jesus’ announcement that “today” is the day of the fulfillment of God’s promises means that we do not need to look solely to tomorrow as the time of “better days,” because “these are better days.” In Jesus Christ, God is with us *today*; every day is a “better day” because we live in the sure and certain hope of our Saviour’s abiding presence among God’s people; for *“now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”* (2 Corinthians 6:2). While the fulfillment of all God’s promises is still unfolding in the fullness of God’s time, we do not live waiting for “tomorrow,” wondering if God’s promises will be fulfilled or if we will be disappointed when that day finally arrives. Because God is always faithful to God’s Word and always fulfills what God has promises, we live in the confidence that because we abide in the presence of our living Lord that we will be blessed with *“strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow, blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!”* (ELW Hymn 733).

- “Christians direct their faith not to the historical figure of Jesus but to the living Lord Jesus. Yes, they assert continuity between that Jesus and this. But their faith is confirmed, not by the establishment of facts about the past, but by the reality of Christ’s power in the present. Christian faith is not directed to a human construction about the past; that would be a form of idolatry. Authentic Christian faith is a response to the living God, whom Christians declare is powerfully at work among them through the resurrected Jesus.” – Luke Timothy Johnson.

After many false promises of “tomorrow” that drove me to the edge of my typical good nature, “today” finally came when our furniture arrived; but even then, the promises that were made to us were not kept. Instead of setting up our bedroom set and removing the packaging, the delivery people dumped an enormous box in our living room and drove away, leaving me to haul it upstairs and confront the three words that frighten me the most: *“Some assembly required.”* After many frustrating hours filled with language unsuitable for public consumption, I finally put the bedroom set together, vowing never to shop at that furniture chain again – no matter how many times I get a phone call invited me to a special sale as a “VIP customer.” Their promises of “tomorrow” had repeatedly failed, and “today” was not what they had assured us would be.

Our Lord’s promise that “today” has arrived in the person of Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is a promise of which we have certainty, because it is a promise fulfilled by our Lord who word is always trustworthy and true, who is always faithful to God’s people, our Lord who has given us the “blessed assurance” that these are better days because *“this is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* (Psalm 118:24).

- “The time of God is today, and the ministries of Jesus and of the church according to Luke-Acts demonstrate that ‘today’ continued ... ‘today’ never is allowed to become ‘yesterday’ or to slip again into a vague ‘tomorrow.’” – Fred Craddock.

We no longer must tirelessly and impatiently wait for tomorrow to come, because tomorrow has become today because Christ is with us today and every day; and therefore, we rejoice because “these are better days.” Amen.