

January 26, 2025
Luke 4:14-21

Epiphany 3
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“I Believe in Today”

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

“Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away; now it looks as though they’re here to stay. Oh, I believe in yesterday.”

The music of the Beatles was in many ways the soundtrack of my childhood. My very first record was a 45 with “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” on one side and “I Saw Her Standing There” on the other. The first album I bought with money I earned on my paper route was *Abbey Road*, and over the years I have acquired a wide assortment of their albums and CDs. I remember watching them on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and I lined up outside the Strand Theatre in Plainfield to watch *A Hard Day’s Night* with a theatre full of screaming fans, many who were wearing Beatles wigs. While I never saw the Beatles in concert, several years ago Susan and I attended a Paul McCartney concert in Brooklyn and were amazed at how great he still sounds so many years later. Whenever I hear a Beatles’ song, I am brought back to those days in the 1960s when their music was an important part of so many aspects of my life.

One of the Beatles’ many popular hits is *Yesterday*, a song sung by Paul McCartney that was a departure from the usually upbeat tempos of their songs. It’s a more somber, melancholy song in which the singer reflects on the troubling state of his current life, when “*suddenly I’m not half the man I used to be; there’s a shadow hanging over me,*” and looks back with longing on former days when “*yesterday, love was such an easy game to play; now I need a place to hide away.*” The singer wishes he could turn back the clock to recapture those halcyon days, going so far to declare that “*I believe in yesterday.*”

Paul McCartney was not the only person to look to the past nostalgically; of all the songs in the Beatles’ catalogue, *Yesterday* is the song that has been most frequently covered by other artists; the song has been recorded by a vast array of singers that include Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, Merle Haggard, Aretha Franklin, and Elvis Presley. While the beautiful melody makes the song an appealing choice for singers, the message is one of longing for better days that speaks to the circumstances of many people who believe that yesterday was better than today. Looking to the past

was in many ways a central part of the faith of the Jewish people in Jesus' day, whose life was rooted in the Word of God that was given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Torah that defined every aspect of their lives. Worship for the Jewish people was centered on the message of the Hebrew Scriptures that was shared in synagogue worship each Sabbath, where the faithful would gather to hear a reading from God's Holy Word, hear their rabbis teach them on the truths revealed in these texts, and pray to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one God to whom they had been instructed in the *shema* to love "*with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" (Deuteronomy 6:5). As they suffered under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire, the Jewish people were called to remember the deeds of the Lord who rescued them from slavery in Egypt so that they would know that the Lord was the one who was with them and would one day bring them liberation from all that held them in bondage.

It was in this faith that was rooted in the remembrance of the deeds of God in establishing the covenant with Abraham, liberating God's people from slavery and bringing them to the land of promise, and blessing them with the Torah and its teachings on how they were to live as the people of the covenant that Jesus was raised and in which he lived his adult life. All that Jesus says and does in the Gospels is within the tradition of his ancestors that he would have learned in his home and in the synagogue in Nazareth. The Gospels show how Jesus regularly affirmed the Sabbath, the Scriptures, and the synagogue; Jesus not only attended synagogue services regularly but participated, as all male adults were permitted to do, by reading Scripture and offering commentary on the readings. In his day, "*the synagogue was not only an assembly for worship but also a school, a community center, and a place for administering justice. Among friends and relatives, in the synagogue Jesus was at home.*" (Fred Craddock).

Today's Gospel lesson follows Luke's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, where Jesus withstood the temptations of Satan through the power of the Word of God he had learned as a child. While the account of the temptation ends on an ominous note, with Luke reporting that "*when the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time*" (4:13), Jesus turns his attention to his home province and the ministry that is before him: "*Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.*" (4:14). In a manner reminiscent of Old Testament references, Luke describes the disclosure of the power of God's Spirit in Jesus. 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 the Son of God.'*" –

1:35), so also now the Spirit empowers Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. Manifestations of the power of God in Jesus will also be evident 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 out they come!’” – 4:36.
- “One day, while he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting nearby ... 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.

Luke's reference to the reports of Jesus' works establishes the fact that what Jesus does in Nazareth and Capernaum is typical of his work in other locales. These episodes of paradigmatic and representative of this period of Jesus' ministry, in which he will be teaching in synagogues in Galilee, Judea, and other places where his travels will take him. It is while he is teaching in the synagogues of his people that Luke reports that he “*was praised by everyone*” (4:15). The praise of God forms an underlying theme in Luke; it is the only appropriate human response to God's disclosure of Jesus as the Saviour. Luke's introduction to Jesus' ministry in Galilee gives the reader an indication of the nature of Jesus' work (teaching), one of its common settings (the synagogue), the source of its power (the Spirit), the result (praise), and its extent (to all). “*Together, these scenes portray the power of the Spirit in both word and deed, in Jesus' teaching and in his healing. What he proclaimed in Nazareth, he began to do immediately thereafter in Capernaum.*” (Alan Culpepper).

Nazareth was figured prominently in Luke's infancy narratives (“*When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth*” – 2:39), but Luke now reminds us that it was in Nazareth “*where he had been brought up*” (4:16). As Jesus had been teaching in other synagogues in Galilee, he now returns to his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath. Luke places Nazareth first in his account of Jesus' ministry because it is first, not chronologically but programmatically. The event announces who Jesus is, of what his ministry consists, what his church will be and do, and what will be the response to both Jesus and the church. As Jesus stands up to read from the Scriptures, the *Hazzan*, or attendant, would have handed Jesus one of the scrolls on which were written the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings (known by the Hebrew acronym *Tanakh*). Jesus opens the scrolls to the words of the prophet Isaiah that proclaimed a message of hope for God's people:

- “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because 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 favour.” – 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1, 58:6).

The words of Isaiah are a servant song in which the Lord announces the coming of one who will be “anointed” by God to bring good news, liberation, healing, and proclamation of the year of the Lord’s favour. It was the prophetic hope that called upon the people of God to look to their future with hope, that their present circumstances would be transformed when the promises of God are fulfilled. It was these words from yesterday that provided the people of Israel with “*strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*.” (ELW Hymn 733). This “anointed one” (*messiah*) will also usher in the amnesty, the liberation, and the restoration associated with the proclamation of the year of jubilee as proclaimed in the Torah:

- “You shall count off seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the period of seven weeks of years gives forty-nine years. Then you shall have the trumpet sounded loud: on the tenth day of the seventh month – on the day of atonement – you shall have the trumpet sounded throughout all your land. And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family ... For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you” – Leviticus 25:8-12.

Following the practice of synagogue worship, Jesus “*rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down*.” The posture of sitting down was significant, since this was the position of a teacher who will be sharing a lesson with the teacher’s students; this explains why “*the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him*” (4:20). While they had probably heard other teachings on this reading, no one would have expected what Jesus proclaimed on this day: “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing*” (4:21). Jesus announces that the centuries of waiting on God’s blessing have ended, that the fulfillment of prophetic promises have been fulfilled in his presence. The child who was proclaimed to be “*a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord*” (2:11) by the angels on the night of his birth now stands before his hometown synagogue and announces that in him God has fulfilled promises made centuries earlier by the prophet, that the “*proclamation of the year of the Lord’s favour*” is no longer something for God’s people to await to be fulfilled in the future, for the time of fulfillment is “today”; “*the eschatological time when God’s promises are fulfilled and God’s purpose comes to fruition has arrived*” (Craddock). The time of God is “today,” and the ministries of Jesus and the church in Luke-Acts

demonstrate that “today” continued; “today” is never allowed to become “yesterday” or to slip again into a vague “someday.”

- “Jesus selected a text that confirmed what John the Baptist said about him and what the narrator of Luke’s Gospel has already testified, that Jesus is full of the Spirit and will baptize with the Spirit. The Spirit had descended on Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism; it had anointed his body for miraculous acts and for proclamation.” – Mitzi J. Smith.

Jesus’ announcement that the promises of the prophets had been fulfilled “today” does not mean that Jesus is calling on the people in the Nazareth synagogue to completely abandon the past or to ignore what God proclaimed to God’s people “yesterday.” Faith is always rooted in the traditions of our ancestors that have been passed down to us; when we gather to receive the Lord’s Supper, we are called to remember that it was “*on the night in which he was betrayed that our Lord Jesus took bread ...*” We are called to remember what our Lord has done for us “*in ages past,*” but we must resist looking to the past nostalgically as the halcyon days of our faith that no longer exist in the present. As God has been our hope in ages past, this assurance of the faithfulness of God is what gives us confidence that God’s blessings are present with us today as well and will bless us in our future. We look to yesterday and how God’s people were blessed by their trust in God’s faithfulness so that we might share that same confident hope that because of what God did for us in ages past through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can live every day in trust and hope that “*the LORD of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold*” (Psalm 46), and that therefore our beliefs need not be confined solely to “yesterday,” but is hope that is available to us every day because “*the steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.*” (Lamentations 3:22-23).

Jesus’ announcement that the promises of God’s prophets have been fulfilled “today” does not mean that we should ignore the past or consider God’s Word before the coming of our Lord to be null and void. We continue to treasure both the Old and New Testaments as the Word of God that continues to proclaim God’s message of hope and salvation; but we are never to look to the past as the only time when God was present or when God was blessing God’s people. The words of the same prophet that Jesus read in the Nazareth synagogue also call upon people of faith to “*not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs up, do you not perceive it?*” (Isaiah 43:18-19). It is a warning against a nostalgic focus on the “former things” that ignores that possibility that

these are “better days” because God’s blessings are as present and active in the present as they were in the past:

- “Ironically, the recitation of past events can itself take on the qualities of timeless myth if it allows nostalgia to expel expectations of ‘new things.’ Memory itself therefore could become a conceptual blindfold if unenriched by awareness of the open-endedness of the divine-human relationship.” – Paul D. Hanson.

Several years ago, I spent some time with Bishop H. George Anderson, who had served as presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Bishop Anderson served during a time when many were lamenting the decline of the Lutheran Church as many congregations were experiencing decline and many people were looking to the past as the “better days” in the church’s life. It was during this period that Bishop Anderson wrote a book with a surprising title: *A Good Time to Be the Church*. When he was asked how he could believe that this was a good time to be the church in light of all of the challenges the modern church faced, Bishop Anderson called upon present-day Christians to see the opportunities present in this day for the Church to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ:

- “Rather than lamenting the lost influence of the church or dreaming of some golden age, Christians can see the spiritual hunger of our time as a special opportunity to speak and act boldly.”

While we must never ignore the past and what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, nor ignore the witness of our ancestors and how that informs our present-day proclamation, we must never confine our belief to yesterday so that we do not see all that our Lord is doing for us today and how that calls us to look toward tomorrow with that same blessed hope. With apologies to Paul McCartney, for those who follow the one who announced the fulfillment of God’s promises in his hometown synagogue, it may truly be said that “*I believe in **today**.*”

Amen.