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Sermon preached at Good Samaritan Episcopal Church, January 27, 2019

Year A, 4 Epiphany

Luke 4; 1 Corinthians 12

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Perhaps we don't catch the (insert surprise inhale) in this morning's Gospel reading, because we are not physically present at the Nazareth synagogue with Jesus as he walks into the room. Jesus, still wet behind the ears from his baptism by his cousin John, is the appointed scripture reader in the temple that morning. Everyone in town has been talking about how the voice of God came over the skies at Jesus' baptism and said: “you are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.”

Clearly, there is something different, something special about this child of Mary and Joseph. He rises, reads a powerful lesson from Isaiah, and then Luke gives us a powerful clue: Jesus sits down. Presumably, he is sitting down in the rabbi's chair. Remember, when a rabbi sits down, that is the sign that he (or now she) is about to offer a teaching. Nobody is expecting Jesus to sit in the rabbi's chair; after all, he is just a carpenter's son. But after hearing the voice of God speak so well of him, nobody is going to challenge him, either.

Luke tells us that all eyes are on him as the room turns starkly silent. Mothers quiet their children playing in the soft space with a hush. Jesus clears his throat and begins to speak. “Today,” he tells them, “this prediction from Isaiah has been fulfilled in your sight.” The Messiah you've been waiting on, the Savior the Hebrew prophets predicted has arrived—and that Savior is me. The poor who are crying out for help in our streets are going to get their relief. Those among you who are blind are about to regain their sight. Those who are high and mighty are about to be placed low. Those who are down and out are about to be placed front and center. In other words: the old ways you've been doing things aren't going to work anymore. Everyone used to hear this passage from Isaiah and just smile and nod.... “we're doing fine,” they would tell each other. “This passage isn't really meant for us,” they would say. Not anymore. “Today,” Jesus says, “This Scripture is fulfilled in your sight.” One translation of this New Testament Greek offers Jesus' words more sharply: “You've just heard Scripture make history. It came true just now in this place.” You could have heard a pin drop.

Biblical scholars believe that this passage from Luke is, more or less, Jesus' first public sermon. It is an ambitious, scandalous first sermon for any rabbi, but especially for someone who is just starting to live into his identity as the Son of God. It is one thing to hold up these ideals from Luke and to call the people to work for them, together, collectively. It is quite another to say, “all this prophecy is coming true right now in your sight.” In other words, brace yourselves, because something big is about to happen.

As his public ministry unfolds over the three years that follow, Jesus proves himself correct. Something big does happen. Jesus gives the blind their sight—literally and figuratively. Jesus sets free people who had long been in prisons not of their own making (women suffering from isolation, people who had been labeled as outcasts and unclean), telling them all to “go” and that “the Kingdom of God has come near you.” Jesus feeds the hungry with the loaves and fishes of God's abundance. Jesus makes alive those who were once dead—literally and figuratively.

But for the people of the synagogue to hear, in this moment, that all of this is about to come true? To be a part of the initial sermon where Jesus tells folks, the old is out and the new is in? Well, that is a little overwhelming. And scary. And frightening. All of us think we want change until it is time to

actually implement the change. Our assigned reading from Luke's Gospel cuts off at verse 21, but does anyone remember what happens in verses 22-29? Someone asks: "Isn't this just Joseph the carpenter's son?" (In other words, you're getting a little big for your britches, young man.) In fact the crowd gets so angry, that by verse 29, they run him out of the temple. (Try putting that on your rabbinical resume and see if you get hired elsewhere!)

With this opening sermon, Jesus sets in motion a reform to the Hebrew faith that is so close to his heart. This reading of Isaiah is not only a scripture passage for Jesus. This passage is, also, his core mission statement. This is the beginning of a new movement that eventually will spark a group of followers to begin following Jesus and doing this work of liberating, loving, setting free, resurrecting, giving sight and hope to those who are in the darkest places.

But Jesus' work does not stop with his death and resurrection. Instead, Jesus' work continues with us, because we are Jesus. Yes, you heard me correctly: we are Jesus Christ. We cannot claim to be anything other if we come to this table and eat his body and drink his blood Sunday after Sunday, week after week, year after year. Jesus' DNA does not pass through us; instead, Jesus' DNA gets into us and transforms us and calls us deeper and deeper into the holy work of God. The Son of God becomes a part of each of us. We become a part of him. We are the hands, the heart, the face of Jesus Christ in the world and to the world. Paul seems to know this, too, as he writes words of encouragement in his first letter to the Corinthians. Paul says: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." If Paul were writing us today, he would say the same thing: "Good Samaritans, you are the body of Christ, and individually members of it." He would say the same to Brenna today: "Brenna, you are becoming part of the body of Christ."

Today marks two wonderful occasions for us: we come together to baptize and welcome Brenna into the body, and we come together to offer our gifts as our congregation takes the next step in our ministry together. We come together to offer with our whole selves, our time, our talent, our treasure, a literal commitment to God, to Jesus, that yes, we, too, are part of this movement he started back in that synagogue in Nazareth long ago. That yes, we, too, are willing to bring the prophecy of God, the ideals Isaiah called for long ago, to bring those true, now, in this place.

Good Samaritans, we are doing the work of Jesus in our community—those who were once blind, now see. People who have felt lost or forgotten or overlooked their whole lives have found welcome here and a place of honor with us. People who have been held captive by a notion of a religion that tells them that God doesn't love them just the way they are have set free. The hungry have been fed—literally, by the work we have done with the Brownsburg Community School Corporation Food Pantry. The sick have regained their health. The dead have come alive. One relatively new parishioner once told me: "this church has saved my life!" I will never forget those words. Why did this church save her life? Because she finally found a community open to the call of God to proclaim the good news to the poor, the blind, the oppressed, the hungry, the seeker, the searcher, the outcast.

As I shared a few weeks ago at our annual meeting, the temptation for any new church plant is to always say, "well, we've made it!" We have welcomed in many new faces, we have achieved our goals, we have made a considerable difference in our community. We can now sit on our laurels and rest. We can say we are a private club, the place feels full and happy, we've grown as much as is comfortable without being too uncomfortable, and things are pretty peaceful here.

But something inside is stirring. And that something, that someone, who is stirring us is Jesus. He is stirring us from the depths of our soul. He is stirring us in the residual bread and wine that lives deep

in our cracks and crevices, that has become a part of us as we've literally ingested him week after week. We are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.

So, as the body of Jesus, we go back to Jesus' mission statement, which we heard him read from Isaiah today. *"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 favor."*

As we gather to Take The Next Step this morning, we are at a critical juncture in the life of Good Sam's. Who else in our community needs to hear the good news that God did the unthinkable—climbing up on a Cross—for them? Who in our community needs to hear the good news that they are not alone in this world, even if they are surrounded by a picture perfect life?

Who in else 46112 and 46123 and 46254 is captive and needs release?

Who else in this neighborhood is blind? Oppressed? Who needs to hear that God is on their side? Who needs to hear that there is an open, loving, welcoming church that is able to include them, to welcome them, to extend hospitality to them—all of them, every one?

Brenna, we welcome you on this journey with us as we Take The Next Step in seeking out God's answer to these questions. We welcome you on this journey with us as we Take The Next Step in responding to God's call to become even more of a faith presence in our community. As we renew our baptismal vows with you this morning, as we bring forward our commitments of giving in just a few moments, we commit to living into this mission statement with you, as we all seek to be the living Jesus in this world.