

Epiphany 3 C Sermon
Luke 4:14-21
January 23, 2022

The Gospel of Today
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¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

...And you thought my sermons were short! After a brief Q&A with the congregation, Jesus’ hearers decided that his version of a short sermon wasn’t working for them and they tried to throw him off a cliff! Thank you for choosing not to respond to my sermons as they did to his.

The truth is, though, the real power of Jesus’ sermon, the gospel good news of Jesus’ sermon, was in its first word: “Today this

scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today. Not yesterday, not tomorrow. Today. That’s where the good news is.

In 21st century America, we are rarely, if ever, truly centered in the present moment as the moment of promise. We either look back to the good old days or we look ever forward. As children and youth, we look forward to being grown-ups, choosing our own clothes, setting our own menu, determining our own bedtime or curfew, making our own rules. As adults we look forward to retirement, or to finishing a massive project and the slow-down at work that’s sure to come with it, or life post pandemic, or just simply getting through another day. Or we fear the future and the uncertainty that it holds. Rarely do we grab the reigns and ride boldly in the present moment. Rarely do we center ourselves in the here and now—appreciating it for what it is, for the moment of consciousness we have to enjoy it.

Faith communities too are often consumed with memories of the past and hopes and fears for the future. Dr. Diana Butler Bass, scholar, historian, and author, writes that, “Speaking of the past may take a form of maintaining buildings and structures, of teaching ancient texts, and passing on patterns of life and values from ancestors . . . [While] speaking of the future is often wrapped up in hopes for salvation and eternal life, desires for answered prayers, for the children to hold onto faith or ‘come back to church.’” She continues that, “Both past and future are important to vibrant communities; healthy and life-giving practices of honoring our ancestors and embracing a hopeful future derive from the witness of the whole biblical tradition.”¹

The rub comes for Bass though, when the primary location of faith lies in nostalgia—a view that past that was better than the present or future—or a view of the future where all our hopes and dreams

¹ Diana Butler Bass. “The Power of Today,” Day1.org, January 24, 2016, https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003dc8/the_power_of_today.

as well as our deepest fears are located in things yet to come. Clearly, Bass wasn't writing during COVID-19 when literally everyone is nostalgic for the past and hopeful for the future! I can't tell you how many times folks have told me how things used to be and how much they're looking forward to them being that way again. I can't tell you how many times I've said and thought exactly the same things.

Still, Bass makes an awfully good point: if we're always longing for the past or either fearing the future or waiting for a better future, that's kind of a problem. Truth be told, that's exactly where a lot of people are, pandemic aside. And it's where a lot of churches are, with memories of the old days when children and youth filled the church, but were never heard because they were so well-behaved; when there were well-attended programs and ministries for people of all ages on every day of the week; when Sunday services were filled to capacity and schools didn't schedule sporting events during church; when the coffers overflowed, people didn't complain about the old hymns, and coffee was served in china cups. Sometimes, the memories of the past become a stumbling block to the present. Thankfully, most churches don't just reflect on the good ole days, they also fret about the future.

Most of the statistics coming out since the mid-70s have showed declining membership in mainline congregations like ours, aging membership, and the national rise of a scary new group called the "Nones," also known as the religiously unaffiliated. With mainline churches closing left and right, shrinking denominational safety nets, and the burgeoning number of Nones, congregations often get fixated on fretting for the future.

The problem with these outlooks, though, is when we're grieving all that's been lost, we don't notice all that hasn't been lost—all the wonderful things, traditions, people, values, that have been carried on. When we're fretting about the future, we don't notice

opportunities to change course or try something different and our fears become self-fulfilling prophecies. We don't notice that New England Church continues to defy the trends. We don't notice that, contrary to popular belief and in the face of informed prediction, mainline Protestantism in America has actually grown, from 13% of the population in 2016, to 16% of the population in 2020.²

When we're stuck in the past or fretting about the future, we don't notice today. For Jesus, though, today was good news—it was gospel. Today was for bringing good news to those who are poor, proclaiming release to those who are captives and recovery of sight to those who are blind, letting those who are oppressed go free, and proclaiming the year of God's favor. That's one heck of a to-do list! For Jesus, the good days weren't in the past to be mourned and he wasn't preoccupied with the uncertainty of the future. Jesus grabbed hold of today and said, "this is when it gets good."

As Jesus' followers, the "Gospel of Today" insists that we honor both our memories and our dreams, but most importantly, it insists that we embrace fully the moment of now. As Bass wrote, "Too often our view of the past romanticizes the work of our ancestors; our vision for the future scans the horizons of our descendants and depends upon them to fix everything. But today places us in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God's desire for the world."³ Today reminds us that our life, the life of our nation, the life of our community of faith, and the life of our world is happening now, not in the past and not in the future, so we'd better live today well.

Dear friends, as we rest in this moment, let not nostalgia for the past nor the fear of the future be the things that hinder your experience of today. For today is very good news indeed. Amen.

² "The 2020 Census of American Religion," PRRI.org, July 8, 2021, <https://www.prii.org/research/2020-census-of-american-religion/#page-section-1>.

³ Diana Butler Bass. "The Power of Today," Day1.org, January 24, 2016, https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003dc8/the_power_of_today.