

“Today”
Luke 4:14-21; I Corinthians 12:12-31a
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By the end of last week, the Powerball Jackpot in the nation-wide lottery had reached a record 1.5 billion dollars. Now let's be honest, how many of you bought a lottery ticket? Isn't it crazy that when it's a paltry 40 or 50 million, we don't think about it and when it gets to be some huge number, so many of us will buy one, when the odds against us winning are so much greater? That was one of the funny things last week when the news shows were trying to come up with illustrations about how great the odds against winning were. One in 292 million or something like that were the odds of winning power ball. Odds that you will die being struck by lightning, one in 134,906. Odds of being attacked by a shark, one in 11.5 million. Odds that you will be elected president of the United States, one in 10 million. One in 292 million, but we went out and bought tickets because we dreamed that it might be us. But should we want it to be us? What happens if we do win the lottery? The other thing the news was full of last week were stories of people whose lives were ruined by winning the lottery. They squandered their winnings, they stopped trusting their friends, they fought with their families—many of them wished that they had never bought those tickets. But isn't this what they wanted? If they had made a wish the week before winning the lottery, how many of them would have wished for this exact thing—money enough to do whatever they wanted? How many of us would wish for the same thing? That's the old saying, “Be careful what you wish for, because you may get it?”

When Jesus goes to his hometown he stands up to read from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He finds the place where Isaiah proclaims that all the wishes of the people are coming true—good news coming to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and the time has arrived of the year of God's favor. Isn't that what everybody wants? Here it is. Today is the day. “Now Jesus is telling them their wait is over. What they've been praying for has arrived. All they have to do is receive the message, release their old ideas of who they are, and live into God's dream for them. This

will happen not because they've worked so hard for it, or planned for it, or even suffered for it. It will come as a result of God's grace pouring in, transforming everything. It will not be brought to them through a return of King David or a series of plagues which will decimate Rome. It comes through the voice of someone just like them, a carpenter's son who tells them miracles are an everyday possibility. It's so unexpected, so different from what they thought, not only are they prevented from receiving it; they actually experience it as a threat." This is not what they want. They want someone to come do it for them. Would we want that?

What is it that we want? What do we want in our deepest desires? Where do we want to be healed? What relationship do we want restored? What measure of wealth would we really like? Now if someone said that we could have it, would we jump at the chance? Perhaps we don't want it given to us because we are proud of being able to do everything ourselves. We are self made people and we don't need anyone to give anything to us. Or maybe we could only be healed if it meant giving up our illness. What if someone said that we could be healed of all bitterness, anger, envy and we could live in peace the rest of our lives. But to do that we have to give up our pride and selfishness and desires to be always right. Would we take it? What if we could have a life or a church that is joyful, exciting and effective? But to have that we have to open our eyes, give up any blindness that keeps us from seeing things as they really are? Do we accept it? Are we ready to see that not only are we gifted by God, but all of us are part of the same body, as Paul says in First Corinthians, we are all part of each other and we need each other? Are we ready for that?

The people in Nazareth were not ready. They were used to hearing the scriptures and thinking a lot about the glories of yesterday, the time of Moses when God led them by signs and miracles out of Egypt. Or thinking about the time of King David and his victories over the Philistines or the power and glory of King Solomon. Or they were used to hearing the voice of the prophet and thinking about tomorrow—about when the Messiah would come and restore those glories or would punish Rome or would bring all the nations to worship at the temple in Jerusalem. They were used to thinking “wasn't

it great back then when God did those things for us,” or “won't it be great in the future when God does those new things for us.”

Now let's be clear—past and future are vital for a community of faith, nowhere more so than right here.

We are proud of the history of this church, that we are 185 years old this year, the first congregation founded in Kalamazoo county, that we have been here all these years witnessing to God's love and faithfulness. And of course we are excited about our future. We love seeing the kids up here and we do our best to empower the youth of our church in their efforts. But do we get too carried away with those things? Diana Butler Bass, scholar of church dynamics says:

Faith communities are often consumed with memories of the past and hopes for the future. 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. 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." 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.

But both "past" and "future" as the primary location of faith have their shadow sides. Overemphasizing the past results in nostalgia--the belief that the past is better than either the present or the future--a disposition that is steeped in grief and fear. Overemphasizing the future--the belief that all that matters is that which is to come--often results in thwarted hope, doubt, and anxiety.¹

There was a recent survey of churchgoers that discovered that a majority of us in the United States have high levels of both nostalgia and anxiety. By a large majority religious Americans, particularly white Protestants, and it doesn't matter whether or not they are liberal or conservative, believe that our best days are behind us and that the future is bleak. Do you think that is true? Is it true for us? Do we look back to days when the church was larger, when there were more in the choir, when the youth group had more kids, when we had more money, when we put on musical programs, when Kouple's Klub was flourishing? Remember how much better it was then?

But maybe the most radical thing Jesus said at that synagogue in Nazareth was the word “today.”

Today this scripture is fulfilled. Today. Not during the times of Moses or David or Isaiah. Today. Not some far off future, but today. Maybe that's why the people end up being upset with Jesus that day.

¹ Bass, Diana Bulter. “The Power of Today,” *Day 1*, January 24, 2016.

They wanted to be reminded of the greatness of their past, or wanted to be reassured about the coming of God's favor sometime in the future. But they didn't want to change their today.

What does that mean to us? Are we caught between a past that we think of as the good old days and worrying about a future that we're sure will be terrible because these kids don't have that past experience to draw upon? Is that why we do things like buy lottery tickets and dream about what we would do with all that money instead of being aware of what is going on right now? I do this all the time, and my family tends to laugh at me. All the kids were home over Christmas and they overlapped by a few days so all of them were in the same house again for about three days. Did I enjoy those days? Did I do everything I could to make those days meaningful? Or did I spend a lot of time talking about how it used to be? And did I spend a lot of time trying to make a plan for the next day? When Annie and Stacey arrived on the afternoon of Christmas day, it took a great effort in the first hour they were there to not ask "Now when are you leaving?" Not because I wanted them to leave, but because I like to have a plan. I like to know what's coming. Because of that I often lose out on enjoying the day. Today.

Jesus essentially told his friends, "Look around. See the Spirit of God at work, right here. Right now. God is *with us*. The ever active, ever loving, ever liberating, always present God is here with us. Now." The Spirit of God was upon Jesus that day. But it was also upon his friends and neighbors, too. And it is also upon us. For Jesus was one of us. And by emphasizing the word "today," Jesus transformed Isaiah's words, Isaiah's prophecy, into a powerful invitation for the whole community to act on behalf of God's justice. The text might have been read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me (and therefore also with you),

because he has anointed us

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent us 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.

Living in God's promise is not about yesterday. Nor is it about awaiting some distant Messiah and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. It is about NOW. It is about Today. It is seeing the person next to you in the pew or in the Gull Prairie Room or in the check out lane at Hardings. It is saying a word of encouragement to that youth today. It is hugging that widow or widower who misses human touch.

You are the instruments of God's love today, you are the voice of God's justice today. You are how God touches the world, today.