

Sermon – Luke 4:14-21  
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“A Word for Today”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. It took several false starts and a few more years than I would have predicted, but at least one of my kids is finally caught up in my favorite fictional world. With the kids finally old enough to handle both the length and the more frightening aspects of the movies, we recently watched all three installments of *The Lord of the Rings*. The story enchanted Anders in particular, to the point that when Frodo finally stood above the raging fires of Mount Doom, Anders was beside himself, fervently whispering, “just throw it in,” as the fate of the world hung in the balance. I was reminded of the power of good storytelling. After all, Tolkien’s tale has been part of my world since I was Anders’s age. I know what finally happened to Frodo and Sam there in the heart of the Dark Lord’s realm. But to Anders the story was brand new. It was alive for him, happening in that moment as if for the first time. Better yet, the morning after we finished the final movie, Anders pulled a copy of *The Hobbit* off the bookshelf and promptly buried his head in the book. For the last several days, he’s been giving me updates from Middle Earth: Dad, they just escaped the trolls! Dad, Bilbo is trading riddles with Gollum! It’s amazing to watch these words spring to life in real time, not a dusty part of the past but vibrant and moving.
2. If that was my response to my son reading a fantasy novel, imagine what the folks in the synagogue of Nazareth were thinking and feeling when Jesus

pulled the scroll of Isaiah off the shelf and started to read. The words were ancient, well-known, unsurprising. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus read, “to bring good news and release, sight and freedom.” Good words, to be sure, but perhaps seeming like little more than a dusty past somehow related to a distant future. What could such words have to do with the people in the here and now? Where John writes of Jesus, the Word made flesh, Luke shows us Jesus proclaiming that he is the Word fulfilled, here and now. Today. The “me” in Isaiah’s ancient scroll is claimed by Christ for himself: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” The dusty past and the distant future collapse into present, sparked to life by the spirited presence of Jesus.

3. Pastor Katie Hines-Shah, a friend of Grace Church who serves in Hinsdale, points out in *The Christian Century* that the word “today” is used in critical moments by Luke as he unfolds the gospel story. *Today* is born for you in the city of David a Savior. *Today* you will be with me in paradise. From the birth of Messiah to his death, what Jesus is doing is for us, today. Pastor Hines-Shah writes, “Luke makes it clear that Jesus’ work is immediate and relevant. The gospel is not given in a vacuum; scripture responds to human need. It isn’t just in John’s Gospel that the word becomes flesh.”
4. Thank God for a word for today! Certainly, it is easy to begin and end our days with a sense of what isn’t right with the world, and I’m not just talking about how poorly Pastor Troy’s Packers played last night. Oh, okay, they’re my Packers, too. I’m just not sure how I feel about that today. If disappointing sports outcomes were the worst we had to deal with, the world would be a better place than it actually is. But today there are real problems. Today, the threat of war simmers in eastern Europe. Today, we mourn with the family of New York Police Officer Jason Rivera, killed in the line of duty while living out his vocation to make his city and better, safer place. Today, we still slog our way through a pandemic in a world in which access to health care and other

basic necessities remains out of reach for far too many people. Today, we have troubles aplenty.

5. Jesus begins his public ministry here in his hometown of Nazareth by naming the troubles of today: Poverty. Captivity. Blindness. Oppression. Luke makes it clear from the beginning that Jesus' mission and ministry is not otherworldly. It is neither a message from a dusty past nor a hope for a distant future. It is a word for today. This Jesus who will be rejected in Nazareth for what he teaches in the synagogue will eventually be rejected by the world and crucified on a cross of death. From the cross he will pronounce the promise of paradise, the hope that lies beyond the troubles of every today in this world. But just so will he be raised, just so will the Spirit be poured out on Pentecost, so that the coming Kingdom would break into our world today. Jesus chooses for his sermon these words from Isaiah to remind the people of the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus is drawing on the ancient idea that not only should people observe a Sabbath day each week, and not only should the nation observe a Sabbath year every seven years, but on the Sabbath of Sabbath years, after seven cycles of seven, the fiftieth year should be a year of Jubilee. And what would happen in those years? Debts would be forgiven and accounts would be cleared. Prisoners would be released and slaves set free. Land would return to its original owners, even if the sale had been valid. The Jubilee was a reset, a time to break cycles and patterns that would otherwise be generational. The year of Jubilee was a time to bring to life the promise of a better tomorrow today. People being people, there is a good deal of doubt as to whether or not the people ever actually enacted the promise of Jubilee, but it remains God's vision for our world.
6. When I was a young child, my parents watched the news on NBC every night. I was always confused by the ads for their morning show, which would begin, "Tomorrow on *Today*." How in the world, I would wonder, did they know today what would happen tomorrow? Promos are not the same thing as

prophecy, I would come to learn. Today, right here in River Forest, we don't hear today about what will happen tomorrow. Instead, we see that tomorrow has burst into today, the promise of God's future made real here and now. So, too, are we, Christ's body of many members, invited to participate in God's work right now. You don't have to wait! Christ, the One long promised, the One for whom we wait, is here. Given and shed for you. He lives not only in the dusty past or the distant future. He is here. Today, your sins are forgiven. Today, you are alive in him. Today, you are called to bring forth a Jubilee of grace. Today, the Word of the Lord has been fulfilled in your presence because today, Jesus, the Word of God is here and makes it so. Amen.

And now may that peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.