

“Fulfilled in Your Hearing”  
Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson  
Luke 4:14-21  
Third Sunday after the Epiphany | January 26, 2025

*The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free ...*

History does not remember whether these words were posted on the doors of public places or shouted through city streets. But by some means—on June 19, 1865—this good news echoed throughout Galveston Bay, Texas.

It had been two and a half years since the Emancipation Proclamation had taken effect ... Two and half a years since that first “Freedom’s Eve,” when enslaved and free African Americans had gathered in homes and churches across the country to await the dawn of freedom—the freedom for which members of their community had fought and bled and sometimes died ... Two and a half years since President Lincoln had declared that all enslaved people in the Confederate States were free. It took that long for news to travel to the westernmost Confederate state of Texas. But when some 2,000 Union troops under the command of General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston Bay, the good news rang out: *The people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free ...*

On that day, more than 250,000 people finally won freedom. On that day, the yoke of their burden and the bar across their shoulders was broken and those who had been enslaved sounded the jubilee. On that day, captives found release and the oppressed went free and the scripture—*this* scripture—was fulfilled in their hearing.<sup>1</sup>

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” Jesus reads from the Prophet Isaiah.

*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.*

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<sup>1</sup> See “Juneteenth,” *National Museum of African American History & Culture*, [Juneteenth | National Museum of African American History and Culture](https://www.nmaahc.si.edu/en/learn/juneteenth).

And then, Jesus sits down and announces to those gathered: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Last week we heard the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana. According to the Gospel of John, it was the first of Jesus’ signs; it was the inaugural act of his ministry. Today, we return to Luke’s narrative, picking up the story at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Immediately following his baptism at the River Jordan, the Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, where he was tempted for forty days. The very first event that Luke records after Jesus’ return to Galilee is this appearance at his hometown synagogue. On the Sabbath day, Jesus stands before those who had formed him in the faith and delivers an inaugural address: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” he declares.

According to Luke, Jesus is very clear about who he is, about what he is called to do. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he announces to the gathered community. No doubt, this comes as something of a surprise to those who have watched Joseph’s boy grow up. But—to those of us who have been following Luke’s narrative—this news comes as no surprise, at all. We witnessed the Holy Spirit descend in bodily form like a dove at Jesus’ baptism; we have heard the Gospel-writer’s reports that Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit. Now, we hear this directly from Jesus: He is God’s Messiah—the anointed one, the one for whom the people have waited. He has been set apart for a particular purpose; he has been anointed and appointed to bring good news.

Standing before this hometown crowd, Jesus chooses Isaiah’s words to announce his sense of call. Like the prophets of old, the Messiah’s ministry will be one of restoration. The Spirit has anointed him to call people back to God, to remind the community what the Lord requires: justice, mercy, humility before God and neighbor. The Spirit has anointed him to announce God’s concern for the vulnerable in their midst: the downtrodden and despairing, the disinherited and the dispossessed. The Spirit has anointed him to proclaim the year of Jubilee, when all people will experience God’s promised wholeness.

Jesus reads Isaiah’s words. And then, he sits down—as was the custom—to begin his teaching on the text. “Today,” he continues. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Today, he says, release and restoration has come to Israel and the world. Today the yoke of your burden and the bar across your shoulders is broken once and for all. Today, Jesus says, the promises of God have been fulfilled. Because the One standing before you is the very embodiment of good news.

Now, this proclamation does *not* mean that the work of God is done. If that were the case, then Jesus’ inaugural act would have been his closing act, too. Which—of course—it is not. As the entire Gospel makes clear, the work is ongoing. If you’ll forgive my “nerding-out” for a moment, I’ll note that Jesus’ announcement that “this scripture has been fulfilled” also conveys the ongoing nature of the work. The

Greek verb that Luke uses here implies continuous action. The fulfillment of God's promises is an ongoing process. Scripture has been fulfilled, and it will *continue* to be fulfilled.

It will continue to be fulfilled as Jesus goes forth from Nazareth to carry out his calling ... Immediately after this scene in the synagogue, the Messiah cures a man with an unclean spirit, releasing him from the forces that have held him fast. And later, Luke tells us, Jesus heals a bent-over woman; in her hearing, he proclaims the good news she has yearned to receive for eighteen long years: "Woman, you are set free."

Throughout his ministry, Jesus brings good news to the poor by showing compassion for those who have too little ... and those who have too much. He lifts up the lowly and gives bread to the hungry. He also forgives a notorious tax collector—a gesture so transformative that it overturns hardened attitudes and evokes restitution and restoration.

Even on the cross, the Messiah remains faithful to his mission. When the repentant criminal who has been crucified beside him begs forgiveness, Jesus responds: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." Even on the cross, he proclaims release to the captives—to those held captive to sin, to those oppressed by an empire's cruel exercise of power.

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus asserts.

*... 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.*

And, as the Spirit of the Lord empowers Jesus to carry out his ministry, this scripture is fulfilled time and time again, in the hearing of those who long for peace, who long for freedom, who long for wholeness.

But here's the thing: Even when the Messiah's ministry ends, the work of God continues. Even after Jesus goes to the cross, after the Spirit leaves his feeble frame and his body is laid in the tomb, after God breaks the chains of death and raises Jesus to new life, the work of God is not finished. Even after the beloved Son ascends into heaven, the work of God is not finished. You know the story: On Pentecost, the Spirit descends again, coming with wind and flame to inaugurate the church's ministry. And, from that moment and for all time, the Spirit of the Lord rests upon us, too. So, by the power of

the Spirit, God's promises are continuing to be fulfilled. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed in word and deed, wherever the good news is heard.

If you visit the lakeside community of Santiago Atitlan in Guatemala, you'll hear the story of one man who committed his life to continuing Christ's prophetic work.<sup>2</sup> Father Stanley Rother was serving as a priest in Oklahoma when he discerned a call to bring good news to the poor and proclaim release to the captives. So, he requested a transfer to the diocese's mission in Guatemala.

In 1968, as the Guatemalan civil war raged, Rother began his ministry alongside the community of Santiago Atitlan. He learned Spanish, as well as the local indigenous language, so he could preach the good news in the people's native tongue. Having been raised on a farm, he introduced new farming techniques and installed an irrigation system so this impoverished community could yield a greater harvest to feed their families. With Rother's help, the community started a small hospital and a weaving co-operative. And—over time—as Rother learned more about the government's exploitation of indigenous Guatemalans, he began advocating for land reforms that would ensure economic security. Throughout his ministry, Father Stanley Rother brought good news to the poor of that Guatemalan community. He proclaimed release to those held captive by unfair economic systems; he announced God's favor upon those whom society despised and dismissed. He proclaimed time and again that God's promises were for them, too.

And whenever, wherever he proclaimed the good news in word and in deed, this Scripture was again fulfilled. It was fulfilled in the hearing of those who longed for peace, for freedom, for wholeness. And, by the power of the Spirit, the work of God continued along the shores of Lake Atitlan.

The church tells and re-tells the story of Stanley Rother's ministry for lots of reasons—many of them good. One of the reasons his story is remembered is because of the way his ministry ended.

By 1980, the long-running civil war had reached Santiago Atitlan, and the army occupied part of the town. Some found Rother's prophetic witness threatening and, before long, his name was added to a death list. Stanley Rother fled the country and sought refuge in his native Oklahoma. But ultimately, he decided he couldn't abandon his flock. So, Rother returned to Guatemala, where he was later executed in the rectory of the church. He is remembered as a martyr of the church, as one who gave his very life in service to the poor and oppressed.

Rother's life and ministry is a moving witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His story shows us one way that we can join Christ in bringing good news to the poor and proclaiming release to the captives. But

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<sup>2</sup> This illustration draws upon my own memories of visiting Santiago Atitlan, as well as the following sites:

"About Fr. Stanley Francis Rother, *The Stanley Rother Project*, [About Fr. Stanley Rother | Stanley Rother Project — The Stanley Rother Project](#)

"Biography of Blessed Stanley Rother," *Archdiocese of Oklahoma*, [Blessed Stanley Rother | Archdiocese of Oklahoma City | Oklahoma City, OK](#)

"Contrasts of Santiago Atitlan," *Guatemala Partnership of New Castle Presbytery*, February 5, 2024, [Contrasts of Santiago Atitlán - Guatemala Partnership](#)

his way is not the *only* way. The Spirit's call does not require each and every one of us to pack up our lives and move to a war zone (thank goodness). Those are places that desperately need good news, but they are not the *only* places that desperately need good news ... Nor does the good news only ring out in history-making moments that transform the lives of hundreds, thousands.

Today—in our neighborhood, in our nation, across our world—there are many who are desperate for the good news Christ proclaims. There are still those who wander in the grip of unclean spirits or who are bent and burdened by illness; those who are held captive by unjust systems or oppressed by hostile forces. No, God's work is not finished.

But today—in this time and this place—God's promises continue to be fulfilled. Wherever the good news is proclaimed in word and in deed, wherever grace is offered, wherever hope is found, God's promises continue to be fulfilled. Even now, God's Spirit rests upon the church—calling us, equipping us, sustaining us to bring good news, to proclaim release, to announce the year of the Lord's favor. And, by the power of the Spirit, we strive to be faithful partners—carrying the promise and presence of Christ near and far, working toward that moment when all the world will know God's promised wholeness, the year of Jubilee.