



Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany  
2 February 2025

Ascension Lutheran Church  
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

There is a running joke among the people who have worked alongside me at the youth gathering. Because the work I am a part of with the youth gathering impacts every participant who is there and everyone watching the livestream. Because when something is said on the largest platform our denomination offers, it can send ripples throughout the church. I do not take my role lightly. It is a privilege to serve and a burden of responsibility. When we are months into the work of planning, inevitably someone will look up in a moment of silence and say to me, “are we on schedule?” Because they want to know if we are going to get everything done in time. My response is always the same. “We are way ahead of schedule.” In the first 18 months of planning, we are almost always “ahead of schedule.” In the last six months of planning, we are almost always behind, but I still answer the question the same, “we are way ahead of schedule.” If you have been around here in the last several weeks, there have been a lot of firsts. The first time Jesus gets lost and when his parents find him, he asks, “why were you looking for me, did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house? The first miracle of Jesus in Cana where water became wine. When Mary says, “do whatever he tells you.” And where the Master of ceremonies at the wedding tells us all, “but you have saved the best wine until now.” What, you did not hear in the last few weeks, because the readings line up differently this year, is the story of Jesus in the wilderness. Where Jesus says to Satan, “One does not leave by bread alone. Do not put the Lord, your God to the test. Worship the Lord your God and serve only him.” The Jesus we meet today is wrapping up his first sermon. Jesus is definitely “way ahead of schedule.” “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” It is Jesus, introducing himself, to the world.

"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 set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." If Jesus would have simply reminded the people of God's promise, all would have been well. If Jesus had only told the people sitting in worship that day that they were blessed – that they were free – that they could see – that they were about to be blessed with prosperity. All would have been well. Worship would end, coffee would flow and all would be pleased to know the son of Joseph. Taking credit for mentoring him when he was younger. Pride would fill the faces of those who knew this hometown boy made good. If Jesus had only done these things. After all, we know in the world today, if you want to be a successful church – if you want to draw people to your doors – then remind people that they are sinners, but don't spend too much time dwelling on that sin – remind them of God's forgiveness. Promise God's blessing for showing up in worship. Maybe promise an extra blessing for those who sacrifice a little more in the collection plate. And then bless them on their way. Wonderful sermon pastor. See you next Sunday – maybe. And then forget most of what you just heard as walk out the door. Because what you hear on Sunday does not always apply to what happens on Monday. No worries, you will be filled next week. Blessed again. Forgiven again. Promised again. Except Jesus. He is way ahead of schedule. And he is ready for more. He wants more. More introduction. More teaching. More love. More readiness for the days to come. And Jesus wants more for those who follow him. "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 set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." If Jesus only would have ended his sermon with the words of Isaiah. But instead, Jesus continues, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

If you have never heard the prophet Isaiah, or it is your first Sunday in church – it is possible that what Jesus says carries no meaning for you at all. But if you are a first century Jew sitting in Synagogue, with Jesus proclaiming the prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled in their hearing, you immediately know what Jesus is saying. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the promised Messiah, the chosen one of God, who will actually make good on the promises of God spoken through the prophet. The people are stunned. Both those who are excited that Jesus is finally coming clean about who they believe him to be and those who are shocked Jesus would claim a title that is far beyond the son of Joseph sitting among them in the synagogue. That is really enough, but Jesus is not wasting this first opportunity to announce the call on his life. He does exactly what we know Jesus to do. He begins to teach with the authority given only by God. “Doubtless you will quote me the proverb, ‘doctor cure yourself! And you will say, do here also in your hometown the things we have heard you did at Capernaum.” What Jesus is doing is calling the bluff of all who will not believe Jesus is who he says he is.

And then Jesus goes for the juggler – Remember when Elijah went to the widow of Zarephath in Sidon when the heavens were shut up for three years and six months and a famine consumed the land. Remember the story - The widow is a Canaanite, a Gentile, and outside of God's blessing. But Israel's king has married a Phoenician princess named Jezebel. God takes out God's anger on all of Israel with a drought that turns into a famine. Worse yet, God sends the prophet Elijah



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to a widow outside the community of the chosen people. The widow has enough oil to cook one more meal for herself and her son and then they believe that they will die. But Elijah asks for a meal and the widow agrees and God blesses her with enough food to survive because she showed faith in the God Elijah announced. If Jesus would have simply blessed the people in the synagogue – all would be well. Instead, Jesus speaks of the blessing of God given to one outside the chosen people, worse yet, outside the faith. And just in case the people miss the point – Naaman the Syrian gets lifted up. Way outside the faith and chosen people – an enemy of God's people is brought healing from his leprosy simply for obeying the prophet's Elisha's words to wash in the river Jordan. Again – just bless the people and get on with your ministry – cute as it is. But Jesus is ready for more. And for wanting more for God's people to know the deep love of God, Jesus, is threatened by the congregation – driving him all the way to the edge of a cliff in judgment for his blasphemy. It is one hell of a first sermon. And trust me, that is the correct use of the word hell in this moment. Pastor Edwin, Pastor Tony, and I were pretty excited to be out of town last Sunday – 70 degrees in San Diego of course. But we thought we had also skipped this reading about the congregation trying to throw Jesus off a cliff for his preaching. No one needs to get any ideas from the Gospel reading today. Imagine my surprise when I came back to church and realized I was preaching on this exact scripture today. Well, no worries, I am not Jesus – what could I possibly say to anger you so much that you start looking for cliffs?

It turns out I did not need to say anything at all. After last Sunday, one of you, without the angry cliff diving, questioned the worship leadership of our new Council President last Sunday, as he blessed bread and wine – though not one person questioned his preaching. I may never understand why anyone might be more concerned about someone reading words of Scripture over bread and wine than they are concerned about the interpretation of Scripture from the pulpit. But I will let you in on a little secret - our Lutheran theology tells us that all will be well. Yes, I can imagine your surprise if you are new to the Lutheran world. But if you have been Lutheran for a while – last Sunday should not have been of much concern. One of the great pillars of our theology is Luther's "priesthood of all believers." It is the idea that all baptized Christians are priests and have equal access to God. A belief that there is no spiritual divide between priest or pastor at the pulpit and the people in the pews. He also believed, as do we, that all Christians have the responsibility to minister to other believers especially by the sharing of scripture. Luther went so to teach that Christians have the capacity to perform priestly functions, such as interpreting scriptures and administering the sacraments. It is only, as time has moved farther and farther from the Reformation's beginning in 1517, that even we Lutherans have begun to separate ourselves from some of the theology we have held so dear for more than 500 years. My friends, we have been way ahead of schedule. It is possible that are backsliding just a bit.

But here is where we find ourselves today. When Jesus announces his mission in the world, the world begins to take sides. Jesus calls us to love but the call, it is too much for some. Good news for the poor – as long as they have all the right documents. It is, of course, time to name the elephant in the room for the community of Ascension. We are walking with Latino siblings that have all kinds of papers and are unsure which, if any, of those papers will actually keep them from being detained, imprisoned, deported. Release to the captives – sounds good, but how exactly am I being held captive? Except the captivity Jesus preaches is our captivity to sin. Do the words, "we are captive to sin and cannot save ourselves" sound familiar? Can it be good news for you now? Sight for the blind - as long as the right people, the ones worthy of healing, are made to see. To set free the oppressed – as long as the freedom we enjoy is not compromised by lifting up another. I am not sure our Savior would agree. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor - for those who deserve it? The Savior of the world does not make the distinction. What Jesus does say to each of us is this – follow me.

Let me decide, Jesus would say, who is worthy. Let me decide, Jesus would say, who is in and who is out. Let me decide, Jesus would say, who is forgiven. People of God – the answer, I expect, is all of us. All of us are called to follow. All of us - worthy. All of us - in. All of us - forgiven. All of us - loved. This is the very grace of God. Another pillar of our Lutheran theology without question except in our own judgment of others. You may disagree. But, after Jesus's sermon today, I believe you would find yourself outside the circle Jesus has drawn.

The only question to answer is whether or not you will honor Jesus' call to follow. And once you have answered your Savior. Martin Luther would remind you – it is our responsibility to be priest and pastor to other Christians and to every other human being who has yet to recognize their own identity as a beloved child of God. "Today," Jesus says, "this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Thanks be to God. Amen.