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Worship Theme:

“God’s Covenant with Abram and Sarai Fulfilled in Christ”

“Fulfilled in Your Hearing”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Second Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2021

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16 Luke 6: 14-21

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

The Sign of the Covenant

When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty;[a] walk before me, and be blameless. 2 And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.” 3 Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 4 “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 5 No longer shall your name be Abram,[b] but your name shall be Abraham;[c] for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. 7 I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring[d] after you.

15 God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. 16 I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.”

Footnotes

- a. Genesis 17:1 Traditional rendering of Hebrew *El Shaddai*
- b. Genesis 17:5 That is *exalted ancestor*
- c. Genesis 17:5 Here taken to mean *ancestor of a multitude*
- d. Genesis 17:7 Hebrew *seed*

Luke 4:14-21

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. 15 He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

16 When 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, 17 and 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 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, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

20 And 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. 21 Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Sermon

Then [Jesus] began to say to them,

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

“...has been fulfilled...”

Fulfilled

Completed

Perfectured

The more I meditate, contemplate, pray on this passage,
the more I am struck by the past tense of “fulfilled”
and our collective possibilities and potential and prospects
when the verb becomes a present participle,
transformed from
Fulfilled into *Fulfilling*
Completed into *Continuing*
Perfectured into *Holy Works in Progress*

When my parents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary,
we had a great gathering, and there were toasts and gifts and speeches.

George Calvert stood at the lectern on the stage
to thank everyone for being present,
and expressed his gratitude for all our love and support
over the miles and smiles.

Buffy Calvert stepped up to the mic and shared:

*“I don’t feel like we got married
as much as I feel like we are still marrying each other.”*

To be married might sound like it is in the past tense.

We got married.

That is done.

Marriage, however, is a process,

an evolving, living, breathing expression of love and covenant.

To be marrying one another

is to affirm that the relationship changes, grows,

transforming the couple and those touched by their covenant.

When I preside at weddings,

in private I pray I not goof like the priest in "Four Weddings and a Funeral"

saying "*Holy Spigot*" or "*...in the name of the Holy Goat.*"

And in public I say to the congregation:

The couple and I spoke at length about the process of marriage.

The couple does not feel as much that they are getting married

as they are marrying each other.

They affirm that their relationship has evolved over their years together

and pray that it will continue to evolve and grow.

Hence, they choose to see their relationship

as an ongoing, living, loving process of grace.

Therefore, my friends, pray for them, love them and care for them,

that their relationship may flourish and give glory to God

So, when we overhear Jesus say,

"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"

we get it.

We grasp that He is testifying that He is the fulfillment

of God's covenant with humanity.

In Him the Scriptures are fulfilled.

In us, thanks to God in Christ,

may we grasp that the Scriptures are fulfilling, continuing, progressing.

Hold on.

Hold on, I am getting ahead of myself.

Let's go back to the ending of Jesus's sermon, to explore where God wants us to begin.

Are you like me,

intrigued by this last line, this bombshell,

the words Jesus chooses to conclude His message?

He just returned from being filled with the Holy Spirit

at the baptismal waters of the River Jordan,

returned after being led by the Holy Spirit

to journey for 40 days and nights of fasting and wrestling with the Tempter,
returned in the power of the Holy Spirit
to preach to His home congregation.
He called for the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah to be brought to Him.
He stood up to read aloud,
because that is what you do in the synagogue.

*“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.”*

“This passage,
written more than seven hundred years before Jesus read them aloud,
was clearly chosen by Jesus
because it strikingly describes
His character and work as the Messiah.” ^[1]

And then, before He prepared to teach, to preach, to proclaim,
He sat down
because that is what you do in the synagogue.

*Then [Jesus] began to say to them,
“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

In modern vernacular He dropped the mic.
Boom.
Startling the congregation.
“Is not this Joseph’s son?” they exclaimed.
So delighted, excited, proud one of their own made good...made the ultimate good.
At last, God has come down,
come to fulfill the Scripture,
come to bring a Messiah to us, to us!
Immanuel, God-With-Us, is with us!

“Clearly what we have is only a portion of his hometown sermon.
We have only the opening words of [Jesus’] sermon preached
on the text from Isaiah.
There must have been more than this,
remembered too vaguely for record,
to explain the admiration [of his neighbors].
Yet this was what startled them:

He had left them, left home as the son of the carpenter
—His mother, brethren, sisters were still among them—
and now He came back claiming to be the Christ,
[returned to transform] Isaiah’s words,
words that had seemed to speak of a far-off glorious dream,
[into] a living and present reality.” ¹²¹

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

When Jesus announced the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy,
He revealed that He was the predicted Messiah,
that the time for God’s gracious deliverance had arrived.

It’s significant that there are two instances
in which the Gospel Luke recorded the fulfillment of Scripture by Messiah,
here in the beginning of His ministry in Luke 4
and the other happening in Luke 24:44.

Recall Jesus returned after the Resurrection to present Himself to the disciples.

They were hiding, in fear when He appeared.
“Peace be with you,” He said.

*He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you:
Everything must be fulfilled
that is written about me in the Law of Moses,
the Prophets and the Psalms.”*

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

He told them, “This is what is written:

*The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,
and repentance for the forgiveness of sins
will be preached in his name to all nations,
beginning at Jerusalem.
You are witnesses of these things.” (Luke 24: 44-48)*

“We witness in Luke that Jesus opens the minds of God’s people,
testifying that He us the fulfillment of God’s covenant,
the gift of everlasting love to show us the way to life and life everlasting.

These two testimonies occurred at the beginning and at the end of Jesus’ ministry.
They constitute an *inclusio*,
implying that the whole of Jesus’ ministry
was a fulfillment of messianic prophecy.

Jesus began [His ministry among us by] preaching the gospel
that enriches the poor, releases bound people,
enlightens the spiritually blind, lightens the blind, and gives the downtrodden
freedom.

He announced that the [Beloved Community] was at hand.” ^[3]

And in the end, which was really the beginning,
He returned, emerging from the tomb, leaving it and death bereft,
filled with the Holy Spirit
to tell us, His disciples, the message.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

*“The age of God’s reign is here...
...the eschatological time when God’s promises are fulfilled
and God’s purpose comes to fruition has arrived...
...There will be changes in the conditions
of those who have waited and hoped.
Those changes for the poor and the wronged and the oppressed
will occur today.
This is the beginning of jubilee.*

*The time of God is today,
and the ministries of Jesus and the church according to Luke-Acts
demonstrate that “today” continued throughout these two volumes,
“today” never is allowed to become “yesterday”
or to slip into a vague “someday.”
The history of the church does not, however,
bear unbroken testimony to Jesus’ announcement...” ^[4]*

We welcomed His Word, yet we have not always embodied it...today.

Are we ready to start embodying?

Continuing?

Fulfilling?

Today?

In other words,

we the Church heard Jesus preach when He was filled with the Holy Spirit,
when He told us He was the fulfillment of God’s dream, vision, hope,
and, amazed, delighted, in awe,
the Church exclaimed, “Is not this Joseph’s son?!”

If we are going to be so proud, let’s live our faith out loud.

Let’s dare to ask aloud

what it requires of you, of me, of US
to take seriously the mission as outlined by Jesus...today!

The verses Jesus selected and preached and embodied are for us, too.
These are a clear call for us to take concrete actions to follow Him,
not simply by saying the right words, preaching Good News;
by also doing and being the Good News.

“Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This is the hard truth, the unvarnished truth, the blessed truth
Jesus preached for us to practice.

Even if it makes us squirm and resist and make up excellent excuses.

William Sloan Coffin, the former pastor of Riverside Church in NYC, said,
*“You shall know the truth
and the truth shall make you uncomfortable.”*

Aldous Huxley, author of Brave New World
went even further when he said,
“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you mad.”

Barbara Brown Taylor attended a spiritual retreat.

The retreat leader asked participants to think of one person
who best represented Christ in their lives.

While many had the usual complements for those special persons
who had “been there” during the “hard times,”
one woman hesitated before answering.

When she finally spoke, she said,

*“I had to think hard about that question. I kept thinking,
‘Who is it who told me the truth about myself so clearly
that I wanted to kill them for it?’”* [\[5\]](#)

The truth is we have been given the Truth of God’s fulfillment in Jesus Christ,
and this truth sets us free,
free to be,
free to love and to love in return,
free to embody what the Spirit of the Lord
has anointed us to do and to share:
becoming verbs with present participles!

It’s a blessed process of growth and grace,
like making sacred covenants,
covenants that take on new life in our souls,
transforming us from within,
touching those whom God places before us.

*“When I was in my late teens,” said Fred Craddock,
“I wanted to be a preacher.
“When I was in my late twenties,
I wanted to be a good preacher.
Now that I am older,
I want more than anything else to be a Christian.
To live simply,
to love generously,
to speak truthfully,
to serve faithfully,
and leave everything else to God.”*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spigot. Amen!

^[1] Edwards, Justin. "Commentary on Luke 4:21". Family Bible New Testament. American Tract Society. 1851.

^[2] Ellicott, Charles J. "Commentary on Luke 4:21". Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers. 1905.

^[3] Constable, Thomas. DD. "Commentary on Luke 4:21". Expository Notes of Dr. Thomas Constable. 2012.

^[4] Fred Craddock, Luke. *Interpretation* series, 1990.

^[5] Barbara Brown Taylor, *Christian Century*, March 18-25, 1998.