

“Today”
January 20, 2022

Isaiah 61:1-4
Luke 4:14-21

Theresa of Avila was a nun who lived in the sixteenth century. And I know, that doesn't sound like the most promising opening line for a sermon, does it? I am the first to admit that nuns from the 1500's don't have much to do with our lives in 2022—usually.

There is a story about this woman, however, that connects with us in these days.

One day she and some fifty other nuns were traveling on foot to a neighboring convent during a terrible snowstorm. When they came to a dangerously unstable bridge that provided the only way across a swollen stream, they paused to pray.

Theresa asked that the bridge might hold up until they were all safely across.

But it didn't.

Just as the nuns got to the middle of the bridge, it collapsed, spilling them all into the icy water below. After they had struggled to shore, Theresa raised her eyes to heaven and said: "Lord, if this is the way you treat your friends, it is little wonder you have so many enemies!"ⁱ

I laugh when I hear that prayer. I laugh with recognition that I too have prayed like this. I laugh because if I didn't, well, sometimes I might cry.

Recently I've felt as though we were walking cautiously over the reopening bridge, only to have it collapse beneath us. Personal well-being and public health concerns led to the decision last Thursday to continue our pause in-person worship. It is the right decision and one that puts the good of our community first. At the end of the meeting when we made this decision, however, part of me felt a little like those nuns in the icy stream.

On the same day that we made this decision, former Congregational UCC member, the Rev. Raven Rowe, posted a meme on Facebook showing three scenes.

“What seminary prepares you for” shows someone juggling one ball.

“What ministry really is” shows someone deftly juggling five balls.

I thought: that's about right.

The final picture was “What ministry is in 2022”—and it shows a person flailing about in a pit, overwhelmed by hundreds of plastic balls.

Again, I laughed. I laughed with recognition.

It is little wonder, indeed, that God has so many enemies!

And I know it's not just ministry that is like that ball pit as this year begins. It's teaching and it's running a business; it's parenthood and it's marriage; it's caring for people and it's caring for our community.

There's a lot of "overwhelm"—I hadn't heard that word as a noun until a few weeks ago and now I've seen it all sorts of places. And whoever you are, wherever you are on life's journey, you probably know that feeling.

The bridges we walk on can feel awfully unstable these days.

Our juggling acts become more and more desperate.

We long for the past—for the "before time."

We long for the future.

Instead, the friends of God are given that simple story from the beginning of the ministry of Jesus.

Jesus goes to the synagogue. He reads the words from the scroll of Isaiah: "God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Oh, that 2022 would be such a year!

In the words of the prophet, we hear something of the salvation—the wholeness—that God desires for each of us and for all of creation.

Isaiah spoke of God's desire by speaking of his ministry:

God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
to comfort all who mourn
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

Hold those words in your heart. Watch and listen.

The son of Joseph and Mary, a familiar member of the community, is becoming known as teacher who is being talked about by everyone, praised by everyone. He reads those words of Isaiah, sits down, and begins to speak.

What will he say?

Luke tells us that Jesus' first word in his public ministry is "Today." With that word we are thrust once more into the living present.

Out of timeless eternity, after some 13.7 billion years, after two years of this pandemic, this is the word of God that we hear.

Today.

Here we are.

Now.

All too often we find ourselves looking backward or forward, remembering times of God's presence in the past, hoping that God might be real for us in the future. Jesus says "Today," which is really all that we have anyway. Today is the gift that we have that we might cherish it. We are the stewards of these hours to use what we have received wisely and fully.

How we live today is of great importance. This is the day that we have, a time to choose to live according to our principles, to love, to give.

Today is the time when we will encounter God, when the good news will come to us.

The Spirit of God speaks to us. For it is the Spirit—not those words alone—that gives life. That requires something of each one of us, doesn't it? Not just a passive hearing, but active listening. So, what should we do? Sell what we have and give to the poor? Feed the hungry, clothe the naked? Love our neighbors as ourselves? Announce good news?

Maybe.

But first, today, just listen.

There is good news: binding up, liberty, release—this was the hope of the Jewish people, fulfilled in their return from exile in Babylon. When they returned to Jerusalem only to find their beloved city in ruins, they realized that they were set free from captivity, they were released, so that they could return home to rebuild, repair, and restore their nation and its cities.

Jesus told those who were listening to him—and if we have ears we, too, will listen—*"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

"Today" is always a shaky bridge, we don't know if it will hold up, we walk across it with faith, not certainty.

But as we listen to scripture *today*—whatever, whenever that day might be—*today* we are sent out into the world. When we listen, we begin to hear God's claim on our lives. For God is the one who releases, sets free, gives sight, and sends us out to bring good news.

That is the word that comes to us, of all people.

That is that word that comes to us, today.

As we listen, as we act, we discover that we are indeed the friends of God and that God is good.

ⁱ Evan D. Howard, *Rekindling the Hope of the Manger*, Judson Press, 1992, pg. 39.