

In the name of God who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed
and to bind up the brokenhearted.

It is with these words that in the Gospel of Luke Jesus begins his ministry. He has just returned from forty days temptation in the desert, and goes into the synagogue in Nazareth where he grew up and chooses the passage we just heard from Isaiah to read aloud to the congregation. It gets everyone's attention; Jesus raises the level of astonishment even further when he follows up the words of Isaiah by telling the people, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

We have noted this Advent how our lessons speak of beginnings; but what a beginning Jesus makes of this passage! He uses it to announce his ministry on earth. He has heard the voice of God tell him at his baptism that he is God's beloved son with whom God is well pleased. He has faced

temptation in the desert; and by proclaiming these words from Isaiah in his home synagogue, Jesus is telling the crowd that he is ready.

When Isaiah was writing, he was speaking of the return of exiles to Jerusalem, where they were to rebuild the temple and the Jewish community ripped apart by the conquering Babylonians. Jesus, when he quotes Isaiah, is talking about the return of exiled souls, our exiled souls, who are reaching out to return to right relationship with God. Whether our exile was caused by our own turning away from the discipline and work of doing right; or whether we are exiled by the sorrows and injustices that fall so heavily on us in this world, Jesus declares that his ministry is to turn in compassion toward all that is broken and repair it.

Jesus' declaration of his ministry using this passage from Isaiah tells us, too, what our ministry is if we are to follow Jesus. We are to bring good news to the oppressed and bind up the brokenhearted; followers of Jesus are to proclaim liberty to release those imprisoned to the works of darkness that tear our souls and our communities apart. We are to comfort and provide for all who mourn; for those whose lives have been ruined by the destructive forces that operate within and around us -- hatred,

contempt, or greed -- we are to seek out those broken and bereaved by these things and build them up, to repair the devastation of many generations.

Jesus has called us to follow him in this mission and ministry, and that can seem daunting. But in our Gospel reading today, we can find strength and consolation when we consider the great task that Jesus has set before us. The passage is this Gospel-writer's telling of the story we heard last week from Mark. John the Baptist is in the desert wilderness baptizing and proclaiming that he is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness "Make straight the way of the Lord!" And the temple authorities come to find out more about him. "Who are you?" They ask. And John's reply is a consolation to us as we regard the mission Jesus has asked us to take up: John says, "I am not the Messiah." Thanks be to God. We are not the Messiah; we do not have to take up Jesus' ministry alone; we do not have to try to accomplish it all by ourselves, either as individuals, or even as a community. "Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me," says John. Among us stands One who we do not always recognize, but who is always present; and this is the strength given us to undertake the ministry. It accompanies the consolation that we don't

have to try to be the Messiah. The Messiah, the Anointed One stands among us to be with us in the mission he declared with the words of Isaiah.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

God, who loves justice, is come among us; God's Spirit has anointed us to take up the ministry to heal and repair broken lives and to release from the bonds of contempt and hatred and greed the souls weighed down by those works of darkness. God the Son began this ministry in his home synagogue in Nazareth with the words of Isaiah. We can take up that ministry remembering the consolation of John the Baptist's words that we are not the Messiah, and do not have to strive for justice by ourselves, but go forward with the Anointed One who stands among us. With that grace, that strength, and that consolation, may we continue in the mission Jesus began; so that with Isaiah and all who bear the good news, we too can greatly rejoice in the LORD, and our whole being exult in our God. Amen.