

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

My pastoral experience tells me that the Psalms are among the most favorite of all passages from Scripture. Many people especially love the twenty-third Psalm, and many have committed it to memory.

And many people also like the twenty-fourth verse of Psalm 118, which says: “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.” I think many people like that verse because it puts into words what many people feel they are missing, which is an appreciation for what they have today.

Many of us carry around with us so much baggage from the past, or are working so hard for future changes, that the present just seems to zoom past us.

There is a spiritual application to this idea of not missing today, too. Within the Christian Gospel message, there is a strong emphasis on the future where, in the end, God will right all wrongs, where his kingdom will fully come, and where the faithful will receive eternal life.

It could even be argued that without the confidence in that ultimate accounting and final reckoning before God, there could be no Christianity as we know it.

Such an expectation, however, can cause us to undervalue the fact that where the Christian message should have the most ongoing impact on us is not the future, but the present.

And today’s Gospel brings this message home for us. In the chronology of Luke’s gospel message, the opening act of Jesus’ ministry takes place in the synagogues of Galilee, one of which was in his own hometown of Nazareth.

There, Jesus was invited to read the scripture of the day. He chose a passage from Isaiah, chapter 61, where the prophet speaks of the “good news” which he was “anointed” to deliver to “the poor” – news of release from oppression, recovery, and the year of God’s favor.

Jesus then sat down, and said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). In so saying, Jesus was telling the congregation that those words from Isaiah defined what the Father God had sent him to do.

The “anointed me” reference in the Isaiah passage meant “made me the Messiah,” so Jesus was saying, in effect, that he was the one God appointed to bring good news and hope to the poor.

He was the fulfillment of this Old Testament prediction, and with his arrival, a new era of God’s blessing had begun.

I could talk more about Jesus' mission, but for our purposes, take note that aside from reading the scripture from Isaiah, the first public word the adult Jesus speaks in the Gospel of Luke is "today." "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus said.

One can even say that in Luke's Gospel "the time of God" is today and that throughout Luke's Gospel, "today" is never allowed to become "yesterday," or to slip into a vague "someday." In other words, the call of God is always for right now.

Eternal life and the coming kingdom are, of course, critical parts of the Gospel, but Jesus came not merely to help people in a "someday realm," but to give spiritual "release" and "recovery of sight" right now.

Jesus' mission was to proclaim that "the year of the Lord's favor" was that year. In fact, the call of Jesus to us is always about today.

We can quickly see that doing good deeds, loving our neighbor, expressing our devotion to God and so forth, all need to take place in the present for us to make any reasonable claim that we are followers of Jesus.

We can't realistically say we are Christians because "someday" we are going to do good deeds and love our neighbor and serve God. Christianity only makes sense as an immediately applied faith, in which there are daily and tangible expressions of it.

And we demonstrate our understanding of this part of the "today factor" when we continue to work to bring about constructive change in society, continue to help the poor, continue to minister to those in prison, continue to struggle for justice for all. It matters what we do.

But the "today-ness" of Christianity is about more than the things our faith impels us to do in the present; it is also about what we receive from it in the present.

If you as a Christian have found a certain "peace in believing," you know that you are not alone – many have said the same. Many here have felt comfort and support from fellow believers.

Many of us are Christians because we find it a satisfying way to live, offering values we believe in and insights for our personal growth and self-understanding.

But there can be a problem with relying exclusively on the present benefits of Christianity: Such benefits can come and go. For example, many people who undergo a religious conversion report that one of the first things they experience is a certain sense of overflowing happiness, or joy. But for most people, that proves to be a passing thing, at least as a surface emotion.

If you talk to people who have been Christians for years, typically only a few will mention happiness as an abiding experience.

That tells us that the today factor in Christianity means not only that there is daily work to do and daily benefits to receive, but also daily tending to perform.

This is because the natural tendency with most things that get us excited is for them to eventually subside. Even our personal faith, which may have once burned like a fire, becomes, without tending, little more than faintly glowing embers.

One good reason for praying prayers of thanksgiving in our personal devotions is to rekindle the fires of gratitude to God and daily joy that once burned brightly within us. They can help us to focus on ways to express our love for God in service and to spend more quality time in his presence.

But there is one more word about the today factor that is essential: While in God's scheme today is where most of our attention will be, it should never be fully divorced from God's tomorrow.

What I do today, how I live today, the tending of my faith today, should never be separated from the fact that I will one day answer before God for how I have lived. So my todays should reflect God's tomorrow.

We have seen several horrible instances in the news recently of people who unlinked today from tomorrow.

People who have gone on shooting rampages have, in effect, taken their today and made that the whole thing. They have behaved as if there is no tomorrow, and for them, there usually isn't, at least not in this world.

Those examples may be too extreme for us to identify with, but whenever we decide to ignore the values our faith puts before us, whenever we decide to chuck everything that is right and go in a different direction, whenever we decide to blow everything for one brief time of wild abandon, we are unlinking today from tomorrow.

When Jesus said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," he was actually linking both to past promises being fulfilled and to the future God is sending, but he was putting the emphasis where it belongs for it to have meaning for us: right here, right now, today.

We, too, need to keep them linked: the faith as it has been understood and explained over centuries past, the promise of the kingdom to come, and all of it lived, practiced, tended, and enjoyed today. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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