

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**  
**Today It Is Fulfilled – January 31, 2016**

Like everyone else that day, I didn't really understand what Jesus was saying. But now I do. Now it makes complete sense.

At the time I was 14 years old – no longer a boy, but still not quite a man. I was not quite ready to settle down. Certainly not ready for a wife or children. My father, may he rest in peace, said that I had a free spirit. He often sighed and shook his head when he looked in my direction, though his eyes were always full of affection. I was the youngest in the family and took full advantage of being spoiled by my mother and older sisters.

I had always known Jesus. He was about twice my age and worked as a carpenter. He was a quiet man – kind and compassionate. No one was a stranger to him. My friends and I liked to watch him work, hanging about his workshop in our free moments. Like his father before him, he was skilled with wood. Whether fixing doors or creating intricate carvings for gifts, his hands were talented. Often he would take breaks from his work to talk with us young men, sharing food and drink with us. He asked us about our lessons.

From the Pharisees we learned about the law. They seem fixated on teaching us entirely from the Books of Moses. What to do, what not to do. In their eyes, the law meant everything. Stray from the law one iota and we risked everything. I mentioned before about my free spirit, right? Yes, well, the Pharisees did not like my questions. Any time I tried to ask why something was so, they glared at me in answer. When I tried to point out a seeming contradiction in the law, I received punishment in return.

But Jesus was different. He would often tell us stories from scripture, from the prophets especially. About how God loved us and how we should love others. He sometimes taught us from the law, but not like the Pharisees. With him, the law didn't seem so rigid. He encouraged my questions and was never afraid to respond to my curiosity. I thought that he would be a good teacher. I told him so. He never answered, but often smiled in return. Occasionally he would look down at his tools, at his hands, and then look away, deep in thought for several moments. And then he would look up at me and laugh, and continue his stories. He made scripture come to life in ways I had never imagined.

Then one day he left town. Many folks were heading out to the Jordan River to learn from a strange man named John who was preaching about repentance and dunking people in the waters of the river. Some called him a prophet, others called him a kook. Word was that Jesus went out to be baptized by this John. I distinctly remember that the weather was strange that day. There was a period of a few moments where lots of thunder rolled across the sky, but oddly the rain never fell. Some claimed they could hear words in that thunder. Jesus never came back to town. A few people

saw him walk out into the desert. They thought it especially bizarre since he carried no food or water with him.

I missed him. I missed hanging out at his workshop. I missed his kindness and his patience with my never-ending questions. And one day, a few months later, we received word that Jesus had become a kind of itinerant preacher, visiting villages in Galilee and teaching in their synagogues. The praise for his messages was not surprising to me. I already knew he had that gift. Finally he came home to teach in Nazareth.

The synagogue was full that day. And when Jesus read from Isaiah, the passage about how God would bring hope to the oppressed and free the captives and give sight to the blind, every eye was glued on him. Then he sat down and made the astounding claim that that remarkable work of God was being fulfilled in our presence. I looked around, gauging the reaction of those who had gathered. Many were silent, not knowing how to respond. Expressions of awe filled the place, all wondering if this could be true.

Then the murmuring began. "What is he talking about?" "Does he really expect us to believe this?" "Is this not Joseph's son?" They were confused. Some seemed rather uncomfortable and shifted in their seats. "What is going on here?" I wondered that myself, and I eagerly waited for what he would say next. But even I was shocked by the forcefulness of what came after that.

Of course we all had our assumptions. Even looking back on that day, even as a young man with a free spirit, I was still caught up in the beliefs and expectations of my own people. We Jews thought we understood God and how God would act among his people. We were the chosen ones after all – God's favored people. We had grown accustomed to having our beliefs reinforced – follow the law, continue the routine, never deviate from the status quo, and we would continue in our favored position.

But suddenly Jesus turned those assumptions upside down. And as if anticipating a negative response, he came out on the offensive. "No doubt you will quote me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself.'" He meant that no one likes to have their flaws displayed. Later on he preached, when judging someone else's faults, make sure you're aware of your own. Don't worry about the tiny splinter in someone else's eye until you've dealt with the log in your own. Of course, he was without fault. I know that now.

He also knew that they would expect proof. Always, the scoffers and doubters expect proof. By what authority do you dare say these things to us? And so he said, "You will say to me – 'Prove it. We heard what you did in Capernaum. Do the same here!'" It's funny how when the voice of truth comes accusingly to us, we will do anything in our power to shift the burden of proof to the accuser. We try to conceal our culpability by challenging the authority of the one who speaks. Sometimes the truth is raw, powerful, much more than we can stomach at the time. We don't want to believe it or admit to

it, and so our defenses come up. But I am convinced, even years later, had he showed them some speck of proof, they still would not have believed.

He knew that also. He was too close to us. Like he said, "A prophet is not respected in his hometown." We'd seen him up close and personal. The elders in town had watched him grow up. His peers had witnessed him laugh and cry, in good times and in bad. Now I was more inclined to listen to him, as were many of the younger ones among the gathered. We respected him, we trusted him. But we remained silent as he spoke. We certainly could not challenge our elders. But we listened to him. We listened closely.

He told two stories. Stories that came from the prophets Elijah and Elisha. Now these were stories not unfamiliar to those gathered in the synagogue. Certainly the prophets Elijah and Elisha were well known among us. In the first story God's prophet Elijah was in great need of food. He was sent by God to get food not from one of the numerous Jewish widows, but to a gentile widow. Yet this woman was quite poor with a son so sick he was about to die. She was prepared to share her last bit of food with her son and then was ready to succumb with him to death. Elijah requested the food be brought to him, and without question, she prepared it and gave it to him. In return God blessed her with abundant food. However, her son continued to weaken, and she cried out to Elijah on his behalf. The prophet took the boy and prayed over him, and God healed him. The gentile widow proclaimed that he was indeed a prophet of God.

The second story Jesus told was about a leper named Naaman. Lepers were numerous in Elisha's time, just as in ours. Naaman was a great commander of a gentile army in the kingdom of Aram. His wife had as one of her servants a young Jewish woman, taken captive during a battle. The serving girl told her mistress about the prophet Elisha who could surely heal Naaman of his leprosy. Naaman went to Elisha, and though he was at first surprised and angered that the prophet only told him to go bathe in the Jordan River, he finally did as he was told and was healed. Naaman was overjoyed and proclaimed that truly the God of Israel was the one true God.

In both stories, each prophet was confronted by someone in need. But in each, the person in need was not a Jew as would be expected, but instead was a gentile. In each story, God provided rescue and solace to the gentile through the prophet, and in each the gentile proclaimed faith in Israel's God.

Like I said before, these stories were not unknown to us. Yet neither were they overly familiar. They were often shared as somewhat of an afterthought, in addition to the great things that God has promised and done for his people the Jews, see how God has also blessed a few gentiles here and there. God's abundance spills over even to those who don't deserve it.

Yet the way that Jesus told these stories, he made it seem that somehow the gentiles were also part of the favored group. Remember, he had first proclaimed that great scripture from Isaiah – the

release of the captives, bringing good news to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. And he proclaimed that today that scripture was fulfilled in our hearing.

Of course the assumption of all those that had gathered in the synagogue was that Jesus referred to release of Jewish captives, and good news to the Jewish poor, and recovery of sight to the Jewish blind, and freedom for the oppressed Jews. Yet by telling these two particular stories from the prophets, it was quite clear to all present that Jesus meant these things for not only the Jews, but also to everyone else.

And this is where things started to get ugly. The attitude in the room grew heated. At first they had been willing to listen to him, to give him a chance. But when he had the audacity to proclaim that God's promises were not only for the favored Jews but also to the unclean gentiles, that was pushing things a bit too far.

I grew afraid for Jesus. I had never seen the men so angry before – my father, my uncles, my older brothers, the other men of Nazareth, men who had helped raise me and teach me. His friends and acquaintances. The women ran away, dragging the children along behind them, not wanting to get caught up in a scene. With shouts, the men surrounded Jesus and drove him out of town. Yet not one of them managed to lay on a hand on him. He left willingly as they led him toward the cliff on the edge of town. I could barely believe my eyes. Would they really push him over it? I loathed to watch, but I couldn't tear my eyes from the scene. And somehow in the midst of all the commotion, he managed to slip away.

I never saw Jesus again after that day. But his words stuck with me. I heard what happened later. In Jerusalem. I knew that there was a faction of Jews that called him Christ, or Messiah. And I know that many gentiles now follow him, calling themselves Christians. I worship with them now.

I am now a grown man, married and a father. I try to live as Jesus taught me. Some say I am still a bit of a free spirit. I work with those who are poor, Jew and gentile alike. I seek a better life for all people. What Jesus said that day in the synagogue stuck with me all these years. God's promises are for all of us. And so my life's work is to help make those promises a reality. I think that's what Jesus would want from me.