

*6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

*19This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" 20He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." 21And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." 22Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" 23He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. 24Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. 25They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" 26John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, 27the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." 28This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.*

Sunny skies, light winds, high of seventy - whenever he spoke this forecast, he found that people smiled. So the weather man decided one day to speak nothing else.

"Sunny skies, light winds, a high of seventy," he reported even when the high was fifteen, and the winds howled, and the rain fell.

Soon no one listened.

"Everything is fine," the preacher said. "Sins are forgiven, God's in his heaven with grandma and grandpa and Uncle Al."

"Everything is fine," week after week he announced.

And husband's cheated on their wives, and the rich despised the poor, and the poor the rich, and the shadow of death crept closer to everyone. Soon no one listened.

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound."

He was equipped only with a word, this prophet from long ago. "You captives are free! You, who are bound, the prisons are opened! Good news, afflicted. Be bandaged, broken hearts."

Yet prisoners still sat in chains, and the afflicted still were afflicted, and captives still carried away to foreign lands. The people no longer listened.

Hundreds of years later, a man named Jesus sat down in the synagogue in his own town. He read these words written by the prophet. He said to the people who had known him, watched him grow up, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus was saying. "The Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound."

Jesus' home town - wives argued with husbands there - fathers beat the spirit right out of their children there - people were enslaved by sins and habits that bound them like chains therein Nazareth.

Most of all death lurked in the alleys there. Death came with disease and accident and aging there. Death took mothers with young children from the children who needed them. Death marched with the foreign armies that left the people of Nazareth victims. To the people in that little town where life was lived and death was died, Jesus would be God's healing word - God's freeing word - good news fulfilled.

Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Was Jesus another weather man promising the blue skies people longed to see, a preacher promising the favor of a God who intended to show no favor? Did he speak an empty word, or God's word?

The people of Nazareth took but a few moments to decide. They picked up stones, ready to let death be the final word on Jesus. But God delivered Jesus from their grasp, and in Nazareth the prisoners still sat in chains, the afflicted were still left in their afflictions, the captives would still be carried to foreign lands.

Nothing was changed. Yet had they believed him, received him everything would have changed for them.

With Jesus, nothing is impossible. Sins are forgiven in him, sins of husbands against wives, sins of parents against their children, sins of nations against nations. In Jesus your sins are forgiven, all your sins, forgiven.

In Jesus, broken hearts are bound up, healed. He is a Lord who is not ashamed to see our pain, our tears, our anger. He will not turn away from you when he sees the wounds in your heart, but he will begin the slow, patient work of stitching the tears, bandaging the open sores, of healing. His gentle word, his constant care and presence, these make whole what was broken.

In Jesus the power of sin and the power of enslaving habits are broken. What you cannot do with your own strength and effort, he can do in you. Trusting in him, relying on him, the impossible is possible, the captives are free.

In Jesus, the prison of death is opened. He who died for all has destroyed the power of death. When death has done its very worst to us, we shall rise up laughing and singing the praises of our Lord.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of prison to those who are bound.”

Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.

You came here today, heart and mind full of the bruises and blessings of a week's living. You gathered here today wanting to be free of all that enslaves you, afflicts you, fears that have captured you. You came here today wanting to hear the temperature will be seventy, the sky blue.

The temperature will not be seventy today, and you will go home from here with bruises still aching, let me assure you.

But I want you to know that God's promise is no empty word, but a word filled full in Jesus. He frees you from sin, from death, from the power of every evil that could enslave you.

Jesus is God's word, come true.