Sermon "Fulfilled in Your Hearing"
October 18, 2026
Patronal Feast of St. Luke
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St. Luke's Church, Wilton

"Remember the past, plan for the future, but live for today, because yesterday is gone and tomorrow may never come." Luke the Evangelist

Perhaps you may have seen that quote on a poster? If you Google it, it comes up as the #1 quote from St. Luke. But alas and alack just like two weeks ago with a popular quote from St. Francis that he never really said, there is no evidence that St. Luke ever said this either! But so what! I'm sure he could have said it, would have said it if someone gave him the chance. Because it is a perfect beginning to a good old-fashioned three point sermon: remember the past, plan for the future, live for today.

Remember the past - I hope you will all have a chance to take some time to look at the wonderful bulletin board Lisa has put together downstairs - photos and articles from St. Luke's events through the years. The Vestry then was mostly men, mostly in suits and ties. You have that on today and someone is going to ask you, "Who died?" but maybe not even then. The women of the church organized a variety of church fairs and even a lobster supper where they cooked whole lobsters. What I noticed, being the person who keeps the yearly and annual records, was the numbers: within four years of establishing the mission in Farmington, numbers had swelled to ____ congregants and ____ children. Within four years! This Sunday marks me being here four years at St. Luke's and while we've had a modest increase in attendance it sure isn't anything like that. Did you know that in 1966 the parish records showed that there were 191 communicants and 328 baptized members – And it wasn't that there were more people – population of Franklin County in 1966 was around 21,000, today a little over 30,000.

But the 1950s through the early 60s were the heyday of church attendance in the US, at least for mainline Protestant denominations and Roman Catholics. First there was the fear factor as we were in the middle of the Cold War and there was the fear of nuclear annihilation. But it was also a time of optimism, we had survived a World War, progress was everywhere: average families could afford to buy a house, people had jobs as the mills and factories were booming and just like in Lake Wobegon all the children were above average – and there were a lot of them! The good old days? Many think so

and long for them but society changed, new varieties of churches sprang up, and our numbers, like the Episcopal church all over but particularly in New England declined. So here we are today, much smaller, much older, the children still clearly above average but far fewer. What are we to do?

Plan for the future - What is our future? Most Episcopal churches in Maine declined through the 2000s and through the COVID years. It seems like that decline has plateaued. No congregations in the Diocese have closed in the last five years. The Diocese continues to offer Strategic Congregational Support for congregations in financial straits. St. Luke's Wilton has not gotten to that point but every year there are appropriate concerns at annual meeting that we spend more than we take in and we raid our endowment more than we would like. During coffee hour today we are going to have a conversation about some strategies for our long-term financial future and I hope you make the effort to join us.

But the other aspect of our future involves defining our mission, who we are in the community and what we do. Here again our numbers and age challenge us. This year we have an uncommon number of people who are stepping down from leadership positions here either in our outreach programs, or Vestry or our fundraisers. And I support all of them in stepping down because no ministry or position here is a life sentence. Situations change and sometimes people just get tired. Will they all continue? If someone steps up to be in charge, they will but people who have led programs in the past have to realize that sometimes events and fundraisers change or die, just as they did through the years as we can see so clearly from our history. What are we to do?

Live for today – This isn't the version sung by the Grass Roots in 1967 with the well-known line, "Sha na na na na na live for today", though perhaps I've given you that earworm, but more the version from St. Luke's gospel that we heard today. Jesus gets up in front of his home town synagogue in Nazareth, takes the scroll from the prophet Isaiah and reads these verses:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Then he says, “Today this passage is fulfilled in your hearing”, the operative word being “today”, and that good news is as applicable for our ears, today, just as it was then. Because it defines our mission – today.

Today do we bring the good news to the poor, both the materially poor through support of local food pantries, feeding programs and heating assistance programs, and the spiritually poor by offering worship with meaning and vitality?

Today do we proclaim release to captives, to those hampered by debilitating physical or mental illness? Do we not only do our monthly healing ministry here in church but do we think to check in on those who are ill or have surgeries, do we care about those captive to abusive relationships?

Today do we proclaim recovery of sight to the blind, not so much to the physically blind but the many people in today’s society who are spiritually blind, who can’t recognize God’s goodness in the beauty of creation and can’t recognize the created goodness and dignity in every human being.

Today do we let the oppressed go free? Do we stand with our Church in protesting against the overreach of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (commonly known as ICE) when they invaded cities in our state such as Portland, Lewiston and Biddeford? Do we care about people oppressed in our own country as well as around the globe and offer not only prayers but aid and assistance?

If today we can answer “yes” to those questions or even a modest “sometimes”, then we have honored the past of St. Luke and defined our future. May we continue.