

Epiphany 4 C
1.30.2022
AJH+

*Jesus began to speak in the synagogue at Nazareth:
"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."*

From the Gospel according to Luke - "They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff."

Preachers, new and seasoned, of all traditions, tend to get a little nervous when this Gospel passage from Luke is read aloud.

Often, when this passage is appointed (at least once every three years), I think of the times I've returned home, to the congregation that raised me, to preach a sermon. As Jesus' experience reminds us, returning to one's hometown to preach is no uncomplicated task.

Now, reading this account from the beginning of Jesus' ministry, as one called to ascend this pulpit here in Blowing Rock, I am mindful that there is no shortage of cliffs nearby. The brow of a hill is not far. Don't get any ideas...

Though we might make this scene fun, it does beg the question, how did we get here? How did it escalate so quickly, from favor to fear? Jesus is not always warmly welcomed by those to whom he is speaking, but how did we get to the point that they were trying to shove him off a cliff?

This morning's Gospel reading picks up at the exact point we left off in our reading a week ago. In fact, one of the verses even overlaps, a repeat from what we read together last week.

In the verses preceding this morning's sections, Jesus was warmly received by his hometown congregation. Unrolling the scroll, Jesus read from the ancient words of a scripture, announcing the fulfillment of the prophetic word in their midst.

As proud friends and neighbors of the emerging evangelist, they were amazed and marveled at his ability to proclaim anew the ancient words of the great Prophet Isaiah - good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, a season of God's favor for God's people.

It was good news, an appealing message to the ears of those who heard this early sermon of the guest pre. But, in the spirit of all the prophets who came before him, Jesus did not end his address to the synagogue in Nazareth there; he continued to announce a message that challenged those crowded around him.

Challenging the depth of their welcome to his proclamation of prophetic fulfillment, Jesus invokes images that stir the crowds.

He calls to mind the image Elijah's miraculous presence with the widowed woman at Zarephath. She was a person with whom the prophet had no business interacting, whose son, unclean by the stench of death, he should not have touched; and, yet, the boy is raised to new life, restoring the life of his widowed mother as well.

Jesus calls to mind the image of Naaman the Syrian. This figure is a foreign servant ailing from leprosy, who is healed by the command of the prophet Elisha after skeptically washing himself seven times in the river Jordan.

While they may seem more distant to us, in a first-century synagogue, these two stories from the Hebrew Bible would have been well-known, accounts with which the gathered assembly was familiar. And, rightly, Jesus' re-appropriation of them in this context stirs a fierce disturbance among the people. For, they proclaim a shattering of the status quo.

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing means that the work that Jesus comes to set into motion, in his words and in his deeds, in himself and in those who follow after him, will utterly upset the way things are in favor of a more expansive way, the way things are supposed to be.

This kingdom of God that Jesus is at the dawn of ushering in, at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, is a movement that will lift up the lowly and the hurting, the sick and the suffering, most often at the expense of the inner circles of power and privilege that too often overlooked and cast aside.

It's this message, this upsetting of the present state of affairs, that fills the Nazarean congregation with a sudden and certain rage, a fury that drives Jesus from the relative safety of the synagogue to the very edge of the cliffs at the edge of town. But it is the good news of God - that the God's Kingdom, God's very family is not limited to the few, but is open and accessible to all, even to the frail and the forgotten.

To proclaim a challenging word of truth, God's truth, is not only the call of our Lord.

Remember the prophet Jeremiah, whose story of being called by name by God, from even before he was born, we read just a few minutes ago. Like so many in the company of the prophets of old, Jeremiah's commissioning was to go among his own people and proclaim a message of hope and possibility to those who longed for good news, a proclamation that would not find him favor with those powers and authority.

Remember those who journeyed with Jesus in these early days. Following his resurrection, they would go near and far, from Jerusalem to the ends of the known world with the message of new and abundant life, healing the sick and freeing those held captive by the circumstances of this life.

Remember those saints who, throughout the centuries, have followed in the ways of the Christ. In many times and many places, are the faithful testimonies of those who have declared that the kingdom of God is still coming into being, is still open to all God's children, is still growing, still widening, still expanding.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing - right here, right now, in this, our hometown.

My friends, dare we follow in this same way, in the thrilling and terrifying way of the teacher driven to the edge of the cliff and live to share the good news of God's invitation to the abundant and ever-growing family of love and mercy, grace and justice.

Let us not be fooled into believing that such good news of radical invitation is confined to preachers and pulpits; it is a sermon to be lived and breathed by each and every one of us.

It is our story, our charge, dear friends, to not leave this good news confined to the relative safety of these four walls, but to carry God's story of hope and healing to our homes and neighborhoods, among friends and strangers, to sidewalks and grocery store aisles, and everywhere in between.

God's kingdom of just abundance is open and available to all.

Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Amen.