

Stay Tuned: There's More...

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Church of the Redeemer

In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah, and began to say, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?" He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'" And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown. But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian." When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 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. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way. Luke 4:21-30

Today's gospel picks up where last week's ended. You'll recall that Jesus is in his hometown of Nazareth, invited to preach in the synagogue, where he's given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He finds there a passage which summarizes his own self-understanding, what we would call his "mission statement." He reads, "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 sits down to preach as was their custom and begins with the words that ended last week's gospel and begin today's: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing..." Last week we wondered together in response to the challenge to us implied in Jesus' proclamation of his mission. In today's lesson we heard how Jesus' own community responded: a puzzling interaction if ever there were one....

This is one of those passages where you wonder whether something's gotten lost in translation, either linguistically or culturally. And in fact, biblical scholars aren't really sure what was going on: why the people were initially appreciative of and subsequently enraged by Jesus' words. To our contemporary ears – at least to mine – it almost sounds like Jesus is baiting the crowd, turning their goodwill to anger. The more I've thought about it, though, I'm not so sure. What if his old neighbors were missing the point; what if their praise was the kind of patronizing sentimentality with which we might greet an earnest speech given by a youngster? We might applaud it, but not really take it seriously. What if Jesus was trying to push his neighbors to see beyond their memories of him as a child to the movement of the Spirit in their midst?

Inspired by the various interpretations of biblical scholars, I found myself musing about the many responses to Jesus' proclamation and presence - all of which I also found in myself. I wonder if you'd become a time traveler with me, journeying back to that ancient Nazarene synagogue to walk unseen among the people and imagine their responses to Jesus. Perhaps these can open us more fully to the movements of our own souls

We arrive outside the synagogue just after the service has ended. It's mostly women outside,

waiting for their men, but they're not standing idly by. No, we hear them marveling at what they've just experienced; they may have been sequestered in the balcony, but they heard every word and they don't know what to make of it: "I played with him when we were little children," one of them says and we stop to listen, "He was just an ordinary boy then, but today! He spoke with such authority, as though he himself were the great Isaiah, as though he himself were announcing good news to the poor.... What's happened to him? Could it be that the Spirit of the Lord has fallen upon him?"

Indeed, who is this Man Jesus, the One we now call "Lord?" For centuries theologians have struggled to find the right words to answer this question, but in my own life, it's been the experience of the Presence of Jesus that I've found most compelling. I wonder what you know of this Presence. Perhaps, you've experienced it in your life through the stirring words of another believer, or in a quiet moment of intense prayer; maybe you've found yourself in desperate need and somehow felt His Presence with you. Or maybe for you, it's been a gradual, dawning realization that you are where you need to be, in a community of people, worshiping One to whom you all belong. Time and again, in our journey of faith, as individuals and as a community, we find ourselves wondering - and discovering - who this One is....

Now we step inside the synagogue, and a hubbub of voices greets us. As our eyes adjust to the dimmer light, we see a group of young - and a few not so young - enthusiasts crowding around Jesus: smiling, laughing, congratulating him; clearly they've become fans, but he's shaking his head - is he annoyed? - holding up his hands as though fending off their adulation. We can't hear what he's saying but he seems to be refuting them in some way. One of the heartiest of the congratulators suddenly turns away, pushing his way through the others, disappointment and anger playing on his face. He grabs a friend as they head for the door: "He's not the Messiah; that must have been rubbish, what we heard about him in Capernaum; says he can't do it here. He's just another pretender...." Had this one been expecting something he wasn't going to get? Were his hopes raised and then dashed - again?

We know that feeling, don't we? We see it playing out on the national political stage: we create a celebrity and pin all our hopes on the personality, ignoring the fundamental message, the need for change to which he's trying to call us - a change that requires something of us. We know change can't happen in a few months or a year, but we are an impatient people, quick to become disenchanted when the hoped-for miracles aren't forthcoming. We want someone to make things better, fast! But when we make the man focus, instead of the truth to which he's trying to point, then when the man no longer fascinates, that truth is lost to us.

I wonder: we proclaim that Jesus is "Lord," but is that enough? And could that very proclamation actually distract us from Jesus' challenge to us: the challenge to live into a way of life based on his radical mission statement?

Our attention is drawn back to the ancient synagogue when we notice a knot of men talking - animated - in the corner. Judging by their attire, they're wealthy, but there's nothing admiring in their glances toward Jesus. We move a little closer and realize they're grumbling about Jesus' call for the Jubilee year, what Isaiah called, "the Year of the Lord's favor." According to the Law, every fiftieth year was to be a jubilee year: all debts were forgiven and land returned to its original owners.

(Of course, God was the true own of the land, but God had apportioned it out to the families of the twelve tribes of Israel and their descendants. Each family, in perpetuity, was to steward its own portion of the land and if use of that land was transferred to another, in payment for debts, say, then in the jubilee year, the land was to revert back to the original family.) Good news for the poor, but bad news for these wealthy men who like so many of their compatriots, we guess, may have found a way to take and keep control of land that had been farmed for generations by their neighbors. "Who is Joseph's son, the son of a carpenter," one of them sneers, "to proclaim the Jubilee. That money is ours; it's owed to us..."

We, too, forget, don't we, that it all belongs to God. At least, I do: I'm to be a steward of it, God's agent in its management, but that doesn't mean what I have belongs to me. But I forget, only rarely thinking about how God might like me to manage what I've been given – and not just my stuff, but my talents, my work, my relationships. I wonder how we can remind ourselves that it's not really ours, become more mindful of our responsibility as God's managers....

But once again something in the synagogue interrupts our pondering. Our attention is drawn back to Jesus; we hear his voiced raised, not in anger, but with the same forceful authority he used when he read the text from Isaiah. Apparently those around him have been questioning him about that text; as we move in His direction, we catch the tail end of a young man's earnest question, "... 'day of vengeance of our God.' What about that?" Ah, apparently he's pointing out that Jesus left out of the Isaiah text the verse about the Lord's vengeance on the gentile oppressors of God's people. We listen as Jesus reminds the men of stories in their own scriptures where God reaches out a healing, helping hand to Gentiles. Wait, now is he implying that these gentiles – Naaman the Syrian and the widow of Sidon – were favored over God's people? That seems a kind of a risky thing to say in this partisan crowd. We're glad they can't see us, since, of course, we ourselves are gentiles

But I wonder: are there those whom we exclude from our lives? People we believe are surely displeasing to God or even deserve God's wrath? I find myself wondering who's on my list? Maybe folks from different political party? Or those who advocate violence or despise people of another race or ethnic group or sexual orientation; surely, God doesn't approve of these people? I wonder doesn't God draw the line somewhere...?

The mood in the synagogue is turning ugly now. They really don't like the idea God could be for others as well as their own people; they don't have much but at least they're God's chosen people. One of the rich men, apparently sensing the chance to get rid of this troublemaker, shouts, "Away with him," and forgetting that the guy who's shouted is the very man who has effectively impoverished them, the other men begin to shove Jesus toward the door. We have to step out of the way as they hurry him past us. Jesus seems surprisingly calm. What is it we see in his face: is it resignation? Frustration? Sadness? Or something deeper?

We follow the crowd-now-become-mob. They push him out the door, through the women and up the hill, growing angrier by the minute. They're getting completely out of hand. We get to the top of the hill, to the edge of a cliff, and see stretched out below us the whole Jezreel Valley, where so many ancient battles were fought. We can see the towns and main road over which Roman legions, traders and the people of God alike, journey east to the Jordan River or west to the great

Mediterranean. Jesus holds up his hand and, amazingly, the clamor dies down, the shoving ceases. He gestures toward the valley below as though in offering, gazing at the valley with a deep ... fondness; the rest of us follow his gaze. Then he looks at us with the same fondness and simply ... walks through the crowd, which parts before him.

We wander down the road with the others in silence, wondering what has just happened, until we arrive back where we started: sitting in a pew in a small church in east San Rafael. We wonder what this has all been about: this strange incident that began with expectation and hope and ended with... what? Not disappointment, exactly; something about this last act of the drama has made us believe that hope may be possible, but not the way we had imagined. God, it would seem, is in it all – is that what Jesus' final, silent gesture was about? We can rant and rave, but we're not going to change God's call to us, God's love for us, God's hope in us

From the very beginning, the way of Jesus has challenged those who hear it. It challenges us to look at the choices we make in life and compare them to the values to which God calls all of humanity. It challenges us to change, a challenge that is never comfortable: in Jesus' own day it both angered and attracted. And, in our own day, are we any less puzzled and unsettled by it? Many ignore or mock it, others seem to embrace it but distort its challenge beyond recognition. And we? I wonder how we respond. I can only speak for myself, of course, but I long to follow this way of life more fully. I recognize how very difficult this lifestyle is and I see that I'm far from living it. This humbles me; how can I judge another when I fall so short myself? And yet, I feel the Spirit of Jesus with me and in me, opening me ever so gently to this fuller participation in God's Kingdom that I so desire. Perhaps, it's the same with you....

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