

Third Sunday of Epiphany

January 27, 2019

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What You Say Back Home

Psalm 19:7-14

Luke 4:14-29



Ancient Greek icon of Jesus teaching in the synagogue in Nazareth

Jesus Said, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

– Luke 4:21

The Gospel reading today takes place just after Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John. Luke tells us that he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. And when he had finished every test he returned to his home. This is Luke, chapter 4, beginning at verse 14:

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*“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.”*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “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.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God

“You can’t go home again.” That’s what Thomas Wolfe thought anyway. Jesus did; he was brave, I think.

It would be hard to preach in my home congregation. They know me there. Too many of them remember the church camp volleyball tournament when I served the tie-breaking point into the lake. They know about the summer Sunday evening when my friends and I climbed up on the roof after youth group with a big pot full of water that we had heisted from the kitchen. We laid in wait until our friends walked out the church doors. We planned to douse them with the water. Only that’s not what happened. Instead we succeeded in hitting our Senior Minister – on his way to a Session meeting! Our pastor was a good friend to us, and a great leader. He was not, however, known for his sense of humor in situations like that.

I guess that’s why they never asked me to preach back home. The thing about preaching back home is that they know you so well.

Is that what happened to Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth? We like to think of Jesus as the sinless Son of God, the pinnacle of human perfection, the boy-God with the 180 IQ and the halo around his head, but this is clearly *not* how the people in Nazareth saw him.

“Hey, Ethel, look, iddin’ that Joe and Mary’s boy?”

They knew him. They remembered – when he had acne, when he’d played goalie for Nazareth High. Some of their sons probably studied with him in Hebrew School. How would you like to have Jesus messing up the curve in your class? Maybe they’d had their bar mitzvah together.

In his sermon that day, when he began telling stories and using examples to teach the lectionary passage from Isaiah, his material came from their common memory. They knew the stories of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath, and Elisha and Naaman the Syrian. Everyone knew those stories as well as we know The Good Samaritan and The Prodigal Son.

So why did they get so angry? What in the world could have enraged his home folks to the point that they would want to kill him...to “drive him out of town, lead him to the edge of a cliff, so that they could throw him off it.” Why would they want to kill him?

For one thing they seemed quite unhappy about the fact that he’d been hanging out over in Capernaum -- think Brooklyn Park or West Baltimore. He’d been teaching, healing, and helping “those people.” “Look Jesus,” they said, “Charity begins at home with your own people.” They were angry because he’d given attention to a group of people they considered less worthy.

And they became angry because he was telling them something they already knew. They were so mad, in fact, that they wanted to kill him. That’s what we do to prophets. We kill them. We kill them because they tell the truth, and the truth, even truth we already know, is often very hard to hear.

That’s the thing about going home. The people at home not only know you; they know the stories too.

Jesus constantly does this. He takes the things we already know and turns them, just a bit. He takes everything another step further. Like this,

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.ⁱ

That is what Jesus does – spectacularly. He gives us new ideas about old truth, and we don’t always like that. “Old truth is fine,” we say. We cling to our cherished assumptions because they feel comfortable and familiar. For example, in Bible study this week we were remembering the horrors of the days of racial segregation. A member of the group described growing up as a white child in the segregated South. She said, “It was simply the way things were. We didn’t question it.”

When someone did question those cherished assumptions, people did lash out, in murderous ways.

Fred Craddock, one the most insightful of all the Biblical interpreters, wrote:

“Anger and violence are the last defense of those who are made to face the [inadequacy] of the tradition they have long defended and embraced. ... We all know what it’s like to be at war with ourselves, sometimes making casualties of those who are guilty of nothing but speaking the truth in love.”ⁱⁱ

The people back home in Nazareth needed a prophet. We all do, though we may not know it. When those prophets speak, it is a dangerous thing.

That day in Nazareth Jesus took those familiar stories beyond the place the Nazareth congregation wanted them to go. Skillfully he reminded them of what they already knew – that

God is free, gracious beyond the bounds of human constructs, blessing and welcoming whomever God wills. That included a desperately poor outsider – a widow from Zarephath, and an enemy combatant – a Syrian officer called Naaman. By recalling their stories Jesus was telling the folks back home that God doesn't play favorites, and being the chosen people doesn't earn you the right to be racist, or sanctimonious, or self-righteous.

That was when they tried to kill him. They failed, of course, this time, but just a few miles away, a few months later, a few more sermons later, they would succeed.

One of my friends says that he doesn't find it surprising at all that Jesus went to the cross. He thinks the surprising thing is that he lived as long as he did with the way he constantly challenged people's prejudices. He touched on and talked about the things they feared most. He hung out with lepers and told stories about righteous Samaritans. He read familiar scriptures and then announced quite clearly and without apology that –

Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

Not someday. Today.

The whole event turns on that one word: Today, *shmeron* say'mare-on in Greek. It's the first public word Jesus utters in Luke's gospel. When Luke says *shmeron* we know that something big, something important is about to happen. When Jesus says "today" the whole atmosphere of the gathering changes.

Why? Because there's a big difference between someday and today.

Shmeron.

To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ⁱⁱⁱ

I tell you Peter, today, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times. ^{iv}

And to the thief beside him on the cross he said:

Today you will be with me in paradise. ^v

Today. There's a huge difference between today and someday. If I tell my husband, "Someday I'll clean out the garage," it may happen; it may not. But if I promise, "I'll clean out the garage today," that's a promise I will keep. (I'm not doing that today – burr.) Here's the point: It's possible to keep someday at arm's length, "I'll get around to it someday." Jesus said, "Today, God has anointed me to free the captives, give sight to the blind and let the oppressed be free, and proclaim the day of jubilee -- not someday but today.

That one word changes everything.

More than twenty centuries have come and gone since Jesus spoke that word and we are having trouble remembering that he chose us, anointed us to do that today.

It's why we are setting up for Winter Relief today. It is why this church has sponsored 10 refugee families, and today we are continuing to love and support the Kdissat family from Syria. It's why our Director of Missions regularly visits ICE detention center; it's why we support the prison ministry, and some of our members lead Bible Study at the Jennifer Road Correctional Center. It's why we provide free space for 12-Step groups, and it's why we feed and educate orphans in Malawi, and visit Christians in the Holy Land,

With your help there's a lot Woods is doing today – but there are more, so may more captives, who are longing to hear good news.

A few years ago, I was doing continuing education at Princeton and met a man named Jim McCloskey. A former naval officer and Vietnam veteran, McCloskey had a successful career in business before he felt a call to enter full-time ministry. He enrolled in Princeton Seminary, but he had trouble with the languages. So, as a respite from the classroom, he signed up to do field work at Trenton State Prison.

At Trenton McCloskey met Jorge De Los Santos who was serving a life sentence for murder. De Los Santos begged for McCloskey's help. He was innocent. After reading the trial transcripts and hearing Del Los Santos' story, McCloskey became convinced that De Los Santos was telling the truth. So, with an enormous amount of prayer and careful consideration, Jim decided to quit seminary. He rented a room that doubled as an office. With absolutely no legal background and the stubbornness (did I say stubbornness? I meant tenacity) of the Presbyterians, Jim managed to locate and expose the jailhouse snitch whose false testimony had convicted De Los Santos. Jorge De Los Santos was freed, and Centurion Ministries was born. The name comes from the Roman centurion, who, at the foot of Jesus' cross, announced,

“Surely this was an innocent man.”^{vi}

That was 38 years ago. Jim retired in 2015, but the work goes on. Centurion can only accept a handful of cases each year, but they have been able to free dozens of men and women who have been wrongly imprisoned. It happens more than you think. They have also quit cases when they discovered that the individual was, in fact, guilty. And, painfully, they have watched as people they knew to be innocent were executed.^{vii}

Jim McCloskey calls the words of Jesus his theme verses...about bringing good news to the poor and release to the captives, and letting the oppressed go free...along with the 37th Psalm:

The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and heritage will abide forever.^{viii}

Not someday, but today.

What do you say to the folks back home? If you care deeply for them, you say, “This is the day the Lord has made. We have today and no other.” Promising that someday God will come and set things right, promising someday the refugees will find a home, promising someday the poor

will be fed, promising someday the captive will be freed – that means nothing. Jesus said “today.” What matters is now!

Diana Butler Bass, former columnist for the New York Times and church historian wrote:

“‘Today’ places *us* in the midst of the sacred drama, reminding us that we are actors and agents in God's desire for the world. ‘Today’ is the most radical thing Jesus ever said. Jesus essentially told his friends, ‘Look around. See the Spirit of God at work, right here. Right now. God is *with us*. Just as I AM promised’ ... Moses at the burning bush, ‘I will be with you.’ This is the sign of God's covenant. The ever active, ever loving, ever liberating, always present God is here with us. Now.”^{ix}

Before this day is over you and I will be presented with an option – the choice. We can wag our heads at this message – say, “yes, that’s nice,” and shelve Jesus’ life-giving message. We can put it away for someday or – or we can act on it, today in some wonderful and (perhaps) difficult way. We can,

Welcome the stranger.
Give sacrificially.
Let go of some old prejudice, resentment or grudge.
Allow the Lord of Life to radically reshape our goals, hopes and dreams.

Think about it. Pray about it. Expect the Spirit of God to show up -- today.

That’s what you say to the folks back home...you say:
“Fasten your seatbelts; today the promise is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Let us pray:

Holy and life-giving God, be present in us today for we are all homeless until we find our home in you. We are refugees with all who are without a place. We are all imprisoned with those who are captive to illness, addiction, and despair. Open our eyes and our hearts to those who are forgotten and unjustly accused. Anoint us with your Holy Spirit that we may bring your Good News...set the captives free – today. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 5:38-39

ⁱⁱ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, John Knox Press, 1990, 63

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 2:11

^{iv} Luke 22: 34

^v Luke 23:43

^{vi} Luke 23:47

^{vii} For more on Centurion Ministries go to centurion.org

^{viii} Psalm 37:18

^{ix} Diana Butler Bass, *Day1*, radio broadcast, first aired January 26, 2016