

Communion Meditation
Luke 4:21-30
February 3rd, 2019
Davidson College Presbyterian Church
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When Jesus is done reading, he follows established custom and *sits down* to preach. With the eyes of the hometown crowd fixed on him, the first word out of his mouth is “*Today*.” Today the hopes contained in this passage are realized in your hearing. Today he has come to release and restore, to reach and redeem. He is the anointed herald who has come to mediate God’s final deliverance. Jesus takes this oft-repeated promise from Isaiah and brings it into *now-ness*.

Sometimes it is dangerous to do things *now*. If Jesus said someday, tomorrow, after a while, by and by, or in the not-too-distant future, he could have pacified the people in their disappointment about where and to whom he has been sent to minister. But when he says *today*—this is my mission and my ministry—he draws a line in the sand and provokes a response.¹

For example, Martin Luther King Jr. knew the dangers inherent in doing things *today*. King penned his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* after southern white moderates criticized his nonviolent protests as “*unwise and untimely*.” “*Change*,” King was told, “*must come slowly*.” They urged him to stop the sit-ins and marches for a while and give things time to settle down. They saw negotiation with the white power structure as the more reasonable path and advised King to be more patient in his pursuit of civil rights for all Americans.

King, determined to live in *now-ness*, explains to his sympathetic critics that he has never engaged in a direct-action movement that was “*well-timed*.” He notes that the word *wait* rings in the ear of the disenfranchised with piercing familiarity. Refusing to abide by a more cautious approach, King says that *waiting* is too much of a burden for oppressed people to continue to bear. Justice too long delayed is justice denied. King, who lived in the moment, sensing that time was not on his side, knew from experience that *wait* almost always meant *never*. There has always been something unsettling about those who choose to act today.²

You know, most of us carry in our hearts and minds *a sacred image* of the Jesus of history. He is, as Albert Schweitzer said, *but a reflection of ourselves*. *Each culture makes him into their own image*.

Many see him as he is depicted by the *white Western world*—a fair-skinned, blue-eyed, blond-haired, meek and mild figure gazing into the heavens. Hollywood has given him a tan, long and flowing hair, and drop-dead good looks but has managed to maintain his white features.

The more likely image of Jesus as he would have appeared in his day—*a first-century Jew from Palestine*—*still upsets many people*. On the basis of scientific research, written descriptions, and skeletons from that era, biblical scholar *James Charlesworth* notes that the historical Jesus would have been about 5’8” with brown skin, curly hair, and a dark beard. He would have weighed 150 or 160 pounds, and he would have been in good shape since he walked everywhere. He would have looked like other Middle Eastern men of his day.³

Many still find this description of Jesus *difficult to accept* and even more difficult to *worship*.

Not only must our Jesus conform to a certain image, but he must also *behave* in a certain manner. The *assertive* Jesus makes some of us uncomfortable. Yet this Jesus shows up throughout scripture.

¹ Cleophus J. LaRue, February 3, 2019, Epiphany 4C, (Luke 4:21:30), *The Christian Century*, December 26, 2018

² *Ibid*.

³ Cleophus J. LaRue, *A Jesus Who Can Be Hard to Like*, (Luke 4:21-30), *The Christian Century*, February 1st, 2019

In Luke 4, however, we have an *assertive Jesus* who seems to be spoiling for a fight. Welcomed by the hometown crowd, adored by many as he stands to read and sits to preach, he soon stokes *controversy*.⁴

But this crowd knows Jesus and he knows them, so they turn out to hear him preach—this favorite son, back in the synagogue, *back* to the friendly and familiar, *back* to a day that used to be. They expect to experience exactly what they have experienced in the *past*; they are *backing into the future* with their eyes on what's *behind*. They crowd into the synagogue to relive the glorious days of *what used to be*.

With the scroll in his hand, Jesus purposely and meticulously finds this passage: “*The spirit of the Lord is upon me for 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.*” (We call this *social justice* today).

But the *today* in Luke 4 of which Jesus speaks is *no mere today*. This *today* has the ring of the *eschaton* about it, for in this *today* one senses what *Thomas Long* describes as “*God’s good future hurtling toward us, bringing the finished work of God to an unfinished world.*” This *today* signals that the age of God’s reign is *here*, that the time when God’s redemptive purposes comes to fruition has arrived. This word in its *now-ness* says **no** to our tendency to get caught up in the paralysis of analysis. It forces us to face the *immediacy* of God’s promises. If we miss the urgency of *today*, we are destined to join the ranks of the unready, trying to get the unprepared to do the unnecessary. *Today*, says Jesus, this scripture is realized in your hearing.

With his insistence on *today*, he forces the hand of the people who thought they knew him so well. They simply cannot bring themselves to accept the *immediacy* of the universal availability of the good news.

Thus their desire to put a *stop to him before he begins*. People often respond in surprising ways when they sense that you are serious about what you plan to do and when you plan to do it.

So, they drive him out of town, lead him to the brow of the hill with the intention of hurling him off the cliff. Their attempt to kill him is but a precursor to what awaits him on Calvary. It is the only thing in this story that awaits *another day*.

Remember, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made resistance, putting faith into action, made *social justice*, a *spiritual practice* (like Jesus) as a part of what he called the *immediacy of now*. As a result, his *Montgomery Bus Boycott*, which was a political and social protest, eventually led to the Supreme Court ruling that said segregation on busses was unconstitutional. The dream he told us about at the *March on Washington* was firmly rooted in his spiritual pursuit of social justice.

We all know well the achievements of Dr. King – let us not forget that he reached those goals not only with the underpinning of his own consistent practice of social justice, but with the massive support of people like you and me who were willing to make social justice in the world a personal pursuit as well.⁵

Friends, when Jesus says, “*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,*” he outlines (by quoting Isaiah) the specifics of God’s plan for *world restoration*, but this should not be interpreted as a project *completed*. Rather, it is to say that persons now, like those in the synagogue, (and us *today!*), are invited to participate in a world restoration that is *under way*.

The Jesus we have constructed in our imaginations—in appearance and in behavior—often does not square with the Jesus of scripture, who seeks to do God’s will *even when it angers those who claim to love God with all their hearts, mind, and soul*.

Let us pray—

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mark Sandlin, *Social Justice as Spiritual Practice*, April 21, 2017

Good and gracious God,

Inspire us toward lives
lived out for others —
lives that persistently shout
from the mountaintops,
“You will not harm him,
You will not take advantage of her.
I demand justice.
We demand justice.”

May we be the bringers of justice.
May we be lights on a hill.
May we be salt unto the Earth.
May we be harbingers of justice,
voices for equality,
God’s love
for a world in need.

May we be your people –
and may we act like it,
bringing peace and love and justice
to all of your Creation.⁶

Amen

⁶ Mark Sandlin, *Bringing Justice [A Prayer]*, October 20, 2018